

POLITICS AND PROVIDENCE:  
JOHN DRYDEN'S **Absalom and Achitophel**

By  
MICHAEL J. CONLON

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE COUNCIL OF  
THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA  
1969

For

Phyllis, Sean, and Margaret

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my particular appreciation for the research materials made available to me through the Graduate Council of the University of Florida, its chairman, Dean Linton E. Grinter, and the Special Collections Department of the Graduate Research Library, and its director, Miss Laura Monti. Three of my fellow students, Mr. John D. Canfield, Mr. John Schwindt, and Mr. Larry P. Vonalt, gave criticism and encouragement to me; and Mrs. Patricia B. Rambo patiently prepared the final copy.

I feel especially fortunate in the help I have received from the members of my supervisory committee. Professor Harold Wilson shared with me his knowledge of English history, while the discussions I have had with Professor Robert Bowers helped in several ways to form my thinking about John Dryden's poetry. The chairman of my committee, Professor Aubrey Williams, has extended countless kindnesses to me. He first brought me to face this dissertation, and by his just precept and scholarly example he enabled me to finish it.

Finally, for the love of my wife and children, who have endured the dissertation far too long and suffered its author even longer, I am very grateful; and to them I dedicate it.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgments	iii
Introduction	1
Notes	8
I - The Kingdom	10
Notes	45
II - The Kingship	54
Notes	80
III - The King's Word	84
Notes	112
Conclusion	118
Notes	121
Works Cited	122
Biographical Sketch	130

## INTRODUCTION

In 1669 the French ambassador to the court of Charles II dispatched this appraisal of England's new government to Louis XIV:

"If Aristotle, who attempted to define the smallest things pertaining to politics, were to come again to this world, he could not find words to explain the manner of this government. It has a monarchical appearance, as there is a king, but at bottom it is very far from being a monarchy. . . .Whether this is caused by the fundamental laws of the Kingdom, or by the carelessness of the King, herein lies the difficulty."<sup>1</sup> Aggravating such uncertainty about the status of the English kingdom and kingship was the endemic fear of Englishmen in the seventeenth century that Rome could gain sway over the crown, or, worse, that a Catholic could inherit the crown. The English, moreover, "regarded Catholicism as the natural ally of royal absolutism," and therefore normally accompanied by "the subordination" of the subject's welfare to "the financial needs or caprices of the King."<sup>2</sup> After the Restoration, then, issues of royal sovereignty and Popery had the effect of dividing the King from his parliament, and particularly from those growing numbers in parliament who thought they, more than the King, could best serve the needs of the people. Rushing through this political situation and spilling out over larger areas of thought in almost every direction were the tides of empiricism and secularism. "The dike of faith," Professor Don Cameron Allen has

written, "was going down as the sea of rationalism burst through. Christians realized that when it had overwhelmed the steeples and drowned the cocks, it would sweep all men into a materialistic skepticism, or, at best, into a rational theism."<sup>3</sup>

In the main such were the issues drawn into the open by a storm of controversy in the late 1670's when rumors of a Popish Plot forced Charles II to a series of confrontations with members of parliament, led by the First Earl of Shaftesbury, who were determined the kingdom could be secured from ruin only by excluding the Catholic Duke of York from the throne. Such were the issues bandied about in hundreds of pamphlets, tracts, lampoons, and panegyrics; and such were the issues woven through a fabric of biblical event by John Dryden in what may be considered one of the few works of lasting value to emerge from the crisis--Absalom and Achitophel (1681). As one seventeenth-century historian, John Pollock, has written, "at a distance of more than two centuries the sum of continuous investigation has little to add to the judgments passed on his times" by the poet laureate. "The flashes of Dryden's insight," he goes on, "illumine more than the light shed by many records."<sup>4</sup> Though Dryden's poem is usually praised in such fashion, frequently, too, the praise has been shot through with doubts about its shape and meaning, or attenuated by an even deeper and more serious doubt about the worth of Dryden's art. Absalom and Achitophel has been used variously, for example, to illustrate Dryden's knack for caricature, his debts to such conspicuously different minds as Milton and Hobbes, his

service to a conservative myth, his heroic pretensions and frustrations, or, simply and contemptuously, his "drudging"--his failure to make a "petty Draught" into a major work.<sup>5</sup> The number and variety of responses, perhaps, affirm the poem's richness and complexity, but for the purposes of my own study they pinpoint the several problems which have become the foci for disputes over its meaning.

It has been difficult, first of all, to accurately describe and assess the actual values implicit in the debates over exclusion and, therefore, difficult to measure the values Dryden uses as a rallying point in his satire. The indiscriminate use of such tags as Tory versus Whig or conservative versus liberal has only enlarged the problem by blurring distinctions and relationships significant to the clash of values dramatized in the poem. Absalom and Achitophel, one recent study has asserted, is an expression of Dryden's "partly Hobbesian and completely Tory belief[s]" about the nature of man.<sup>6</sup> Setting aside the questions raised by the phrase "Tory belief[s]," the description of Dryden as servitor in his poem to the views of Thomas Hobbes seems especially suspect. For we are asked to accept this assertion in the face of little evidence from the poem's context and even less from the poem itself. Nor does the author ever make clear the extent and nature of Hobbes' influence on the debates over exclusion. Accordingly, in my first chapter, entitled "The Kingdom," I have examined the ways Hobbes' characteristic equation between the law of self-preservation and political obligation may have influenced the arguments of Shaftesbury and his party to justify

an Exclusion Bill. This undercurrent of Hobbism in the crisis provides an explanation for the gestures to Hobbes that I believe Dryden has made in his poem to disvalue the opposition party. Far from holding to a Hobbesian view of man, Dryden, it seems to me, understood this latest attempt to tamper with royal prerogatives as another symptom of the assault by Hobbists, Deists and other free-thinkers on the traditional belief in the providence of God and its operation in the affairs of nations. ✓

The task of apologists for the kingship, as symbolizing essentially sacramental obligations, was made all the more delicate, of course, by the antics of Charles II, who seemed dedicated to the easy and less than exemplary life of a Restoration gentleman. In this task Dryden's attitude toward the King as a man subject to all the weaknesses and indulgences of ordinary human beings has been hard to place. The prevailing view has been that Dryden made large concessions to Charles II in the poem by submerging the <sup>loose in morals</sup> libertine atmosphere of his court in the pious and polygamous past of the Old Testament. In the second chapter, "The Kingship," I have emphasized the ways Dryden establishes a connection between the sexual disorders of David's (i. e., Charles') house and the civil disorders of his kingdom. While I would agree that Dryden's attitude toward the King is concessive, I am convinced, too, that he has patterned the events following upon David's adultery and culminating in Absalom's rebellion as an emblem of the ways God in His providence arranges retribution. Rendering the King in this way, Dryden could draw from a long-standing



tradition, recently discussed by Professor Inga-Stina Ewbank, that managed to fuse both a "cautionary and a typological" attitude toward the figure of David.<sup>7</sup>

The third and in some ways a most crucial part of Absalom and Achitophel critics have questioned and debated bears upon Dryden's decision to conclude his poem with a speech from the throne by the King. Samuel Johnson--apparently the first to censure Dryden's use of the speech--found an "unpleasing disproportion between the beginning and end" of Absalom and Achitophel and appraised the speech an inadequate and far too attenuated resolution to the confrontation of forces dramatized within the poem.<sup>8</sup> In my final chapter, "The King's Word," I have tried to suggest some ways David's speech properly completes a series of gestures in Absalom and Achitophel to the divinity that was thought to hedge about the kingship, and I have tried to suggest, too, the ways the speech closes off Dryden's argument for the patience and mercy of both the King and the Godhead. Dryden's depiction of the King as a reluctant oracle of justice, provoked to a posture of punishment by an ungrateful kingdom, moves to a proper denouement in this gestus oratorius of the poem's last lines, harmonizing royal justice and divine providential justice, the King's word and God's logos.

I have treated these three problems at the cost of a fully formed reading, because I believe they are significant to our understanding the values Dryden was trying to defend in Absalom and Achitophel. Accordingly, I have only glanced at the Miltonic echoes

in the poem--though it should be noted these echoes have been exposed by several recent articles and books.<sup>9</sup> I have not tried at this time to place the poem into the context of English satire. Nor have I treated in sufficient depth the effects Dryden achieves through the poem's narrative voice: "the gentlemanly tone," as Professor William K. Wimsatt has described it, "the cool and judicial posture," that "sometimes masks ironic mayhem."<sup>10</sup> It is a voice of unusual flexibility, moving easily through the tensions unleashed by Dryden's conflation of Jewish history and English history. Honest, irreverent at times, comic and elegiac, lashing and praising, the voice, as one recent study has put it, "modulates from a 'disinterest' that is at first sight light and witty to a stronger attitude, a reaction to absurdity that is personal and far nearer to scorn, if not disgust."<sup>11</sup> But the voice of Absalom and Achitophel--urbane as it may be--does not and should not distract us from the overriding issue of the poem. For in an attenuated way, sometimes in a tacit way and sometimes in a quite explicit way, Dryden reminds us throughout his work that providence very often operates through the innumerable responses of men tossed by the demands of a moment, and very often turns the wisdom of the wise into folly. If the three essays I have made on Absalom and Achitophel, finally, have a common focus, it is Dryden's service in the poem to the just promptings of divine providence in the affairs of nations. In the final analysis, as Professor Barbara K. Lewalsky has written, Absalom and Achitophel confronts us with that "transformed epic battle continued throughout

the ages wherein victory is won not by strength of numbers or clash of arms but by moral virtue and the working out of God's providence,"<sup>12</sup>

In its own way, the poem figures divine purpose, and through the metaphors of kingdom, kingship, and the King's word--abused, threatened, and restored--Dryden has contrived a lasting vindication of the "scheme of grace"<sup>13</sup> in human experience.

## NOTES

1. Cited from J. J. Jusserand, A French Ambassador at the Court of Charles the Second (London, 1892), p. 106. The ambassador's observation is cited also by Maurice Lee, Jr. in The Cabal (Urbana, 1965), p. 4. Lee's discussion of the doubts and ambiguities surrounding the restored monarchy is relevant here, as is J. R. Jones, The First Whigs: The Politics of the Exclusion Crisis, 1678-1683 (London, 1961), p. 4.
2. K. H. D. Haley, The First Earl of Shaftesbury (Oxford, 1968), p. 4.
3. Don Cameron Allen, Doubt's Boundless Sea: Skepticism and Faith in the Renaissance (Baltimore, 1964), p. x.
4. John Pollock, The Popish Plot (London, 1903), p. 22. The quotation is cited in The Poetical Works of John Dryden, ed. by George R. Noyes (Cambridge, Mass., 1909), revised, 1950, p. 958, n. 114.
5. For an assessment of Dryden's contribution in Absalom and Achitophel to the art of caricature see Mark Van Doren, John Dryden: A Study of His Poetry (New York, 1920), reprinted, 1960, Indiana University Press: Midland Books, pp. 154-159. Dryden's debt to Milton has been considered by Morris Freedman, "Dryden's Miniature Epic," JEGP, LVII (1958), 211-219; by A. B. Chambers, "Absalom and Achitophel: Christ and Satan," MLN, LXXXIV (1959), 592-596; by Leonora Leet Brodwin, "Miltonic Allusion in Absalom and Achitophel: Its Function in the Political Satire," JEGP, LXVIII (1969), 24-44; and, more fully, by Anne Davidson Ferry, Milton and the Miltonic Dryden (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), pp. 21-121. The most recent articles to define Dryden's values in Absalom and Achitophel as Hobbesian values are James E. Wellington, "Conflicting Concepts of Man in Dryden's Absalom and Achitophel," Satire Newsletter, IV (1966), 2-11, and R. L. Brett, "Thomas Hobbes," in The English Mind: Studies in the English Moralists Presented to Basil Willey, ed. by Hugh Sykes Davis and George Watson (Cambridge, 1964), p. 52. A reading of the poem as the expression of a "conservative myth" has been developed by Bernard N. Schilling, Dryden and the Conservative Myth: A Reading of Absalom and Achitophel (New Haven, 1961). Ronald Paulson recently has refined Schilling's argument to accommodate what he describes as the "Tory fiction" of Dryden's work in The Fictions of Satire (Baltimore, 1967), pp. 120-126. Edwin Morgan finds (with Wellington cited above) the poem's structure flawed (a "petty Draught")

in his "Dryden's Drudging," in Dryden: A Collection of Essays, ed. by Bernard N. Schilling (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1963), pp. 44-70.

6. Wellington, p. 2.

7. Inga-Stena Ewbank, "The House of David in Renaissance Drama: A Comparative Study," in Renaissance Drama, ed. by S. Schoenbaum (Evanston, 1965), VIII, 30.

8. Samuel Johnson, Lives of the English Poets, ed. by George Birkbeck Hill (Oxford, 1905), I, 437.

9. See note 5 above.

10. William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, Literary Criticism: A Short History (New York, 1957), reprinted, 1967, Random House: Vintage Books, p. 192.

11. McD. Emslie, "Dryden's Couplets: Wit and Conversation," Essays in Criticism, XI (1961), 271-272.

12. Barbara K. Lewalski, "The Scope and Function of Biblical Allusion in Absalom and Achitophel," ELN, III (1965), 34.

13. The phrase is Maynard Mack's. See his valuable Introduction to the poem in The Augustans, ed. by Maynard Mack (second edition; Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1962), pp. 6-10.

# I

## THE KINGDOM

When this Doctrine of [Mr. Hobbes] was infused into the Kingdom, they altered and changed the government four or five times in a moment.

William Lucy (1673)

[i]

In 1683, two years after the publication of Absalom and Achitophel (1681), John Dryden defined the opposition to kingship in England as a combination of "zealous sectaries" and "profane republicans." "The fanatics," he suggests, "derive their authority from the Bible, and plead religion to be antecedant to any secular obligation; by virtue of [this] argument, taking it for granted that their own worship is only true, they arrogate to themselves the right of disposing the temporal power according to their pleasure," while "the broad republicans are generally men of atheistic principles, nominal Christians," who are "otherwise Hobbists in their politics and morals." Both parties, Dryden believes, "hold kings to be creatures of their own making, and by inference to be of their own disposing; with this difference, notwithstanding, that the canting party face their pretences with a call from God, the debauched party with a commission from the people."<sup>1</sup> Dryden's trenchant response throughout his occasional poetry to the extreme Protestant sects is well known. But the

connection he claims here between Hobbism and "profane republicans," and the bearing such a connection may have on the meaning of Absalom and Achitophel has not been engaged sufficiently by recent scholarship.<sup>2</sup> Several studies, in fact, suggest that Dryden's values in the poem correspond rather closely to those of Hobbes.<sup>3</sup>

I am convinced, with Professor Charles E. Ward and others, that Dryden was no Hobbist;<sup>4</sup> but I am convinced further that the very threat posed by Hobbism in the period is significant to the meaning of Dryden's satire in Absalom and Achitophel. I am convinced, in other words, his description of the broad republicans as a party of Hobbists who believe "kings to be of their own making," and of "their own disposing," ought to be taken seriously, and I am convinced his description agrees with the prevailing reponse throughout the Restoration period to the Philosopher of Malmesbury and to those who shared his views. In politics, as in philosophy, Hobbism was thought to be the nub of radical opinion in the late seventeenth century and the principal threat to the traditional notion of a civilized community.<sup>5</sup>

The political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes embraced three distinctive propositions which were commonly associated in the Restoration with political Hobbism and were appraised as especially disruptive to the established order. He believed, of course, that the government and the laws defining a citizen's obligation to it should be deduced from what he described as an axiomatic proposition on the nature of man--his famous description of man in a state of nature. Because, Hobbes says, man's condition "is a condition of war" and because in such a condition "every one is governed by his own reason;

and there is nothing he can make use of, that may not be a help unto him, in preserving his life against his enemies; it followeth, that in such a condition, every man has a right to every thing; even to one another's body."<sup>6</sup> The first law of nature, then, "is the liberty each man hath, to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own nature."<sup>7</sup> Hobbes believed, furthermore, that once a man fully understood the misery of living in this state (i.e., a state of war), he would mediate his right to all things in exchange for a state of comparative peace. According to Hobbes' second proposition, then, a man is "willing, when others are so too," for "peace, and defence of himself," to "lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself."<sup>8</sup> As a "means of so preserving life, as not to be weary of it,"<sup>9</sup> men would mediate their rights by contract and make a commonwealth in which authority would be transferred to a ruler or assembly. Hobbes' third proposition--the need for government by the sword--follows from his first two propositions. Because of the acquisitive inclinations of men remain a constant threat, despite the obligations imposed by the social contract, Hobbes became convinced that peace could only adequately be secured by an absolute, de facto power within the state. "The only way to erect such a common power," he says, "as may be able to defend [men] from the invasion of foreigners, and the injuries of one another, and thereby to secure them in such sort," as "they may nourish themselves and live contentedly; is, to confer all their power and strength



upon one man, or upon one assembly of men, that may reduce all their wills, by plurality of voices, unto one will." This, he goes on, "is the generation of that great Leviathan," or "that mortal god, to which we owe under the immortal God, our peace and defence. For by this authority, given him by every particular man in the commonwealth, he hath the use of so much power and strength conferred on him, that by terror thereof, he is enabled to form the wills of them all; to peace at home, and mutual aid against their enemies abroad."<sup>10</sup>

The relationship, then, between self-preservation and obligation functions in a very crucial way for Hobbes' argument. As Professor Quentin Skinner has put it in his excellent article on "The Ideological Context of Hobbes' Political Thought," Hobbes was convinced that "the notion of a mutual relation between protection and obedience circumscribed as well as defined the limits of a citizen's obligation." And this proposition implied, moreover, that "such obligation must cease where the power [and source of safety] itself fails."<sup>11</sup> Nations so governed, therefore, would be always vulnerable to strife provoked by the self-interest of a few; and Hobbes himself felt disposed to remark on this weak tendon in his anatomy of the body politic. "The end of obedience," he says, "is protection; which, wheresoever a man seeth it, either in his own, or in another's sword, nature applieth his obedience to it. And though sovereignty, in the intention of them that make it, be immortal; yet is it in its own nature, not only subject to violent death, by foreign war; but also through ignorance and the passions of men, it hath in it, from

the very institution, many seeds of a natural mortality, by intestine discord."<sup>12</sup>

It was almost universally agreed, Professor Skinner has demonstrated, "that Hobbes had abandoned any belief in 'the obligation laid on us by fidelity (the law of God Almighty in our nature) antecedant to all humane covenants,'"<sup>13</sup> and throughout the Restoration period Hobbes' critics focused on what was thought to be his characteristic appeal to the law of self-preservation, and to the prospect it posed of a society incessantly disrupted by a succession of rulers raised up and pulled down by human caprice. In his compendious survey of the Leviathan, for example, the Earl of Clarendon, Edward Hyde, argues that Hobbes "hath humbled [ the King ] sufficiently by giving his subjects leave to withdraw their obedience from him when he" most needs "their assistance, for the obligation of Subjects to the Sovereign is understood . . . to last as long, and no longer than the power lasts to protect them."<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, "when by a powerful invasion from a foreign Enemy, or a prosperous Rebellion by Subjects," the "sovereign is so oppressed that he can keep the field no longer, his subjects owe him no further assistance, and may lawfully put themselves under the conqueror."<sup>15</sup> Writing during the exclusion crisis, the Rev. William Falkner arrives at a similar conclusion. "Though Mr. Hobbes," he writes, "sometimes hath overlarge expressions concerning the power of Governors," yet he "doth also undermine the safety and stability of Governors and Government, By asserting that . . . the end of pacts [is ] the preservation of life."<sup>16</sup> Falkner concedes "it is certain that prudence and the laws of God and Man, oblige every man to

take just and due care of his own preservation," but to say "that self-preservation is the first principle and prime law of nature," and "its obligation is so great in all cases, that all other Laws of Nature and Equity must give place thereto," would "fill the world with tumults, and subvert the foundations of its Peace and Government."<sup>17</sup>

While it may never have been considered very prudent in the seventeenth century to admit unequivocally one's debt to Hobbes, from the Commonwealth to the Restoration the signs of acceptance by a significant number of politicians and pamphleteers still remain. And while the Philosopher's success has been "submerged under the weight given to the contemporary attacks on" him, "the popular acceptance of Hobbes' views," Skinner has noted, "weighed with his critics from the start."<sup>18</sup> John Eachard, whose trenchant satires on Hobbes received a compliment from Dryden, noted in 1673 that there were many "sturdy resolved participants" in Hobbism,<sup>19</sup> while another contemporary lamented how "greedily" Hobbes' views were being "sought and cried up."<sup>20</sup>

In the Commonwealth period, for example, "Hobbes' doctrines were to attain the rather invidious status of official propaganda for the Republic of England,"<sup>21</sup> and Professor Skinner has found several editorials in the Mercurius Politicus for the year 1651, which include passages from Hobbes' writings. One such passage is the Philosopher's "characteristic discussion of the citizen's obligation to obey any power with the capacity to protect him."<sup>22</sup> Such weight given by Cromwell's apologists to Hobbes' authority, in fact, may have led many orthodox statesmen and divines to believe Hobbes had written his Leviathan to vindicate the revolutionary regime. The Earl of

Clarendon puts it quite bluntly. No one, he says, disputed the book at the time of its publication, because its author "commanded thirty legions (for Cromwell had been oblig'd to have supported him, who defended his Usurpation)."<sup>23</sup> Clarendon also suggests the Philosopher's "de facto justification for 'succession'" should be interpreted as a token of Hobbes' "officious Care" to perpetuate Cromwell's tyranny.<sup>24</sup> Hobbes, of course, formulated his political theories well before Cromwell came to power, but the association between the Philosopher and republicanism prevailed--encouraged apparently by Hobbes' critics and even by some of his disciples.

When the establishment was threatened again in the 1670's and when the nation--apprehensive over rumors of a Catholic plot to assassinate the King<sup>25</sup>--seemed again amenable to revolutionary policies, Hobbes' views on preservation and obligation inevitably influenced the pattern of debate. Bishop Burnet noted at the time, for example, that those who supported Shaftesbury's policy of exclusion emphasized the de facto power of the King and the parliament to change the laws of succession in any way conducive to the public welfare, for they believed, he says, "all things in relation to [government] were to be measured by the public interest and safety of the people."<sup>26</sup> In the words of Thomas Hunt, writing on The great and weighty considerations, relating to the Duke of York, "every form of government is our Creation and not God's, and must comply with the safety of the people."<sup>27</sup>

Needless to say, the large majority in the House of Commons who opposed the succession of the Duke of York were thoroughly orthodox

and outspokenly loyal to the government. Reasons of "public safety" and "public interest" had influenced debates over liberty and sovereignty in England long before Hobbes appeared on the scene. The term "Hobbist," moreover, was not always applied with discrimination in the period.<sup>28</sup> But given these qualifications, it needs to be emphasized how certain associations had been building up in the second half of the seventeenth century between Hobbes and two political assumptions. The orthodox assumed, first of all, "that as Hobbes grounded political obligation on calculations of rational self-interest, so he believed that a man became absolutely obliged to obey any government that could protect him." They "assumed, in the second place, that as Hobbes had made obligations depend on protection, so he had intended to add that when a subject was not adequately protected his obligation must cease."<sup>29</sup> In several ways these assumptions slipped into the debates over exclusion, and while there is little evidence, if any, to support the charge frequently made in the period that the Earl of Shaftesbury was himself an avowed Hobbist,<sup>30</sup> there is evidence that Shaftesbury surrounded himself with men sympathetic to Hobbes' views and disposed to put his views to practical use.

Some years ago, for example, Professor Edward N. Hooker described a dedication, written in 1680 by an admirer of Hobbes named Albertus Warren. The dedication compliments Shaftesbury as a friend and patron of still another Hobbist, Martin Clifford, whose A Treatise of Humane Reason (1674) had created a considerable stir.<sup>31</sup> And there are even more precise traces of Hobbes' influence on the opposition's

arguments against the crown. The avowed Hobbist, Charles Blount, had written a highly inflammatory pamphlet supporting the Exclusion Bill,<sup>32</sup> while another member of Shaftesbury's circle, William Cavendish, the Duke of Devonshire, contributed several writings to the cause. In one of these he unequivocally acknowledges his debt to Hobbes, and goes on to define the crisis at hand as a crisis of obligations based solely on the law of self-preservation:

It seems to me to be an undeniable position that government is intended for the safety and protection of those that are governed; and that where the supreme power is lodged in a single person, he is invested with that power, . . . for the good of the people . . . . For admit, according to Mr. Hobbes, that monarchical government is formed by an agreement of a society of men, to devolve all their power and interest upon one man, and to make him judge of all difference that shall arise among them, it is plain, that this can be for no other end, than the security and protection of those that enter into such a contract. Otherwise, you must suppose them madmen, voluntarily to strip them of all means of defence, against the fury and violence of one of their number, rather than continue in a state of war, where, at the worst, they are as free to rob as they are subject to be robbed.<sup>33</sup>

Cavendish insists, furthermore, that the law of self-preservation bears directly on the succession question, "for if no reason of government can be assigned but the safety and protection of the people, it follows naturally that the succession of princes in hereditary monarchies, cannot be binding nor ought to be admitted; where it proves manifestly inconsistent with those ends."<sup>34</sup> No Catholic, Cavendish believes, can in conscience defend the Protestant religion to "the utmost of his power," and "if he be incapable of

doing this; that is, if the ends of government cannot be obtained in the ordinary course of succession," the state will "fall into confusion." For there will be no power "to provide for its preservation."<sup>35</sup>

To a nation of tradesmen fearful of losing their livelihood, always suspicious of Catholic plots, and long apprehensive of the day when circumstances brought a Catholic to the very seat of their government, Cavendish's argument must have been a compelling one. To the Anglican clergy and to a majority of orthodox statesmen, on the other hand, the argument struck a blow at several long-standing assumptions about the nature of the English kingship and the basis of a citizen's obligation to it. As Professor W. H. Greenleaf has pointed out, the orthodox had long accepted the idea of "an ancient constitution," to which "both the King and parliament were subject and which guaranteed the rights and liberties of Englishmen." The "moderate supporters of monarchy," he goes on, used this tradition "to resist encroachment by parliament on the status and influence of the crown without going so far as to adopt the absolutist view."<sup>36</sup> The laws forming the core of this constitution, moreover, were thought to be based on divine law. To be subject to a political authority, therefore, one had the obligation to look upon it as a participation in the same authority or power that created and governs the universe. Obligation, according to this view, does not stop simply with the material welfare of men, but defines their very status as creatures of God. A policy of exclusion seemed an affront to this view, driving a wedge between the affairs of the nation and the

affairs of God, presuming a nation's right to preserve itself unaided from some contingent calamity and to be as it were its own providence. The orthodox, in sum, interpreted this latest threat to the idea of kingship as one more symptom of the every-increasing tendency of men at this time to join with Hobbists, Deists, and neo-Epicureans alike and, in John Tillotson's words, "to banish God out of the world."<sup>37</sup> It is more than just a coincidence, therefore, that at about the same time Shaftesbury was laying his strategy to effect passage of an Exclusion Bill, Englishmen, loyal to the established order, were writing, with uncommon vigor, vindications of the doctrine of providence.

[ii]

The doctrine of providence, the principle that the God who "created should govern,"<sup>38</sup> is at least as old as the teachings of Socrates. Gleaned from such classical sources as the De Natura Deorum and Plutarch's Moralia and assimilated to the theology of the Old and New Testaments by the early church fathers, the doctrine received its final Christian form in the Middle Ages from the writings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas.<sup>39</sup> Tudor divines and dramatists alike saw the hand of God everywhere,<sup>40</sup> and the seventeenth-century historians, Professor Herschel Baker has written, were convinced that all events emblemized a divine plan. In Baker's words, "Neither Raleigh's universal history at one end of the century nor Bossuet's at the other would have been possible without the conviction that in the fall of the sparrow, as in larger events, God's purposes are made



manifest."<sup>41</sup> When men deny God's "ordering of sublunarie matters," when they make Him into "a maimed Deity, without an eye of Providence or a arm of Power," when they limit Him "only to matters above the clouds;" then, Thomas Fuller concludes, they will have made the first and most crucial concession to a philosophy of atheism.<sup>42</sup>

By Dryden's time Fuller's warning seemed even more ominous. "Never before," Professor R. S. Crane has written, "had the traditional faith . . . been threatened by a larger and more dangerous accumulation of enemies. Never had freethinking in all its forms been more prevalent or the revolt against historical Christianity so open and aggressive."<sup>43</sup> Throughout the period in which Dryden wrote most of his occasional poetry one finds a continuous response to the notion that the universe is simply subject to chance, or the domain of an absentee Lord. In sermons and tracts by churchmen and statesmen alike, we are reminded again and again that next "to the acknowledgment of God's being, nothing is more essential to religion, than the belief of his providence, and a constant dependence upon him, as the great governor of the world and the wise disposer of all the affairs and concernments of the children of men."<sup>44</sup>

In opposing the notion that God was totally removed from human affairs, orthodox thinkers emphasized the distinction between general and particular providence. The most eminent jurist of Dryden's time, Sir Matthew Hale, explains the distinction as follows. While God, he says, has created an order to accomplish his purposes, and while this order will infallibly realize His purposes, while "every created Being is governed" according to this general providence or

by the "implanted method, rule, and law wherein it was created," God may often act "above, or besides, or against" such laws of nature.<sup>45</sup> God, it was thought, may often insinuate "Himself into nature--working not" so much "in defiance of natural law, but through skillful manipulation of it."<sup>46</sup> Through the administration of His particular providence, Hale goes on, God may excite "second causes to [ the ] production of Effects which being excited they naturally produce; sometimes impeding them, sometimes diverting them, sometimes directing them, sometimes by . . . uniting other more active or contrary causes;" and although "the interposition of" God's particular providence may not be "the immediate antecedent Cause," it may be "the third, the fourth, the tenth, the twentieth cause distant from the Effect."<sup>47</sup> Hale believed, furthermore, "if we should deny the intervention of these Imperate Acts of Divine Providence in relation to actions Natural or Moral that appear in the world, we should exclude God's Regiment of the World in a great measure, and chain up all things to a fatal necessity of Second Causes."<sup>48</sup>

If the orthodox were convinced that Providence influenced seemingly trivial events, if "not a hair can fall from our head, nor a sparrow to the ground, without the will of our heavenly Father,"<sup>49</sup> the case for the long haul of history and the rise and fall of nations seemed all the more obvious. According to Robert South, "we must allow Providence to be more intent and solicitous about Nations and Governments," and "it must need have a peculiar Influence upon the Erection and Continuance, and Dissolution of every Society."<sup>50</sup>

Dryden himself makes this point in his preface to Annus Mirabilis:

"I have heard, indeed, of some virtuous persons who have ended unfortunately, but never of any virtuous nations: Providence is engag'd too deeply, when the Cause becomes so general."<sup>51</sup> God's particular providence, the Rev. Isaac Barrow insists, "is chiefly employed in the managing of affairs of great moment and benefit to mankind; He therefore hath a main stroke in all revolutions and changes of state: He presideth in all great counsels and undertakings; in the waging of war, in the settlement of peace; in the dispensation of victory and good success."<sup>52</sup> The succession of kings, it should be noted, was thought to be a particular token of God's interest in the affairs of a state. "When the Right of Succession," Henry King writes, "brings a King to his throne, this . . . carry's the greatest mark of God's favour, both to the Present Prince, and to those from whom he was Derived."<sup>53</sup>

This emphasis on the operations of God's particular providence in affairs of state was reinforced by a widely held belief about the essential difference between the status of individuals and the status of societies in respect to God. "Indeed, as to particular persons," John Tillotson says, "the providences of God are many times promiscuously administered in this world, so that no man can certainly conclude God's love or hatred to any person by anything that befalls him in this life. But God does not deal thus with Nations. Because public bodies and communities of men, as such, can only be rewarded and punished in this world."<sup>54</sup> Because in the fullness of time they would be dissolved, because these "combinations of men,"

in Atterbury's words, "would be swallowed up in the Kingdom of the Lamb," the "Justice of God's administration, in Regard to such Communities, must be manifested either here, or not at all."<sup>55</sup> In the Restoration period, then, politics increasingly supplies the terms which poets and divines use to define the desperateness of the human condition and the need to rely on the protection of providence. Politics, Tillotson observes,

depends on so many contingent causes, any one of which failing the best laid design breaks and falls in pieces; it depends on the uncertain wills and fickle humours of man, which are perpetually shifting from one point to another, so that nobody knows where to find them: besides an unaccountable mixture of that which the heathens called fortune, but we Christians by its true name, the providence of God, which does frequently interpose in human affairs, and loves to confound the wisdom of the wise and turn their counsel into foolishness.<sup>56</sup>

Tillotson's remarks should remind us that for many Englishmen the policy of exclusion, advocated by Shaftesbury and his party, not only struck a blow against the traditional belief in obligations and loyalties based on divine law, but also against the traditional assumption that God still had a hand in the continuity of human institutions, the traditional belief, as Reinhold Niebuhr has described it, that "the authority by which a community orders its life is the result of a slow accretion in the organic process of history, the adjustment of interest to interest and the mutual acknowledgment of rights, which proceeds providentially."<sup>57</sup>

Tillotson's remarks, furthermore, bring us squarely before the crucial issue, running like an Ariadne's thread through all the different material written on the subject of exclusion, and one virtually ignored by critics of Dryden's poem--the belief on the part

of many orthodox thinkers that only God "hath a perfect foresight of contingent events"; only God can see "upon what pin each wheel moveth, and with what weight every scale will be turned"; only God "discerneth all the connections, all the entanglements of things, and what the result will be upon the combination, or the clashing of numberless causes."<sup>58</sup> Against the pleas to exclude the Duke and preserve the nation, the exhortation to "trust in providence" became a rallying point of tracts written in defence of the King and the laws governing the succession. As one of Dryden's contemporaries puts it, those who press the king to exclude his brother and by implication perform an act of violence upon the institution of monarchy itself, do "mightily distrust Providence."<sup>59</sup> In another tract, which Professor Charles Ward has suggested may have been the work of Dryden,<sup>60</sup> the overriding question is whether or not the nation intends "to outreach the Divine Providence," to "so far despair of God's providence in preserving the work of his own hands, as never to think it secure, unless it be established upon the quick-sands of our wicked inventions?"<sup>61</sup> Isaac Barrow warned at the time of men with "great contrivances to settle things; everyone hath his model of state, or method of policy, to communicate for ordering the state, each is zealous for his own conceit, and apt to be displeased with those who dissent from him."<sup>62</sup> Barrow's conclusion should come as no surprise:

As God's providence is the only sure ground of our confidence or hope for the preservation of Church and State, or for the restitution of things into a stable quiet; so it is only our hearty prayers, joined with a conscientious observance of God's laws, whereby we can incline Providence to favour us.<sup>63</sup>

Shortly after the King declared his intention to abide by the laws governing the descent of the crown in April, 1681, Shaftesbury's party issued a letter (presumed to be from Shaftesbury's own pen), which attacked the King's declaration and, again, pressed forward the plea of self-preservation. The statement apparently was considered so inflammatory that George Savile and Dryden were commissioned by the government to write rebuttals. In His Majesties Declaration Defended Dryden takes up the questions of "self-preservation" and "contingency." Addressing the specific claim by the opposition's letter "That the Right of Nature and Nations will empower Subjects to deliver a Protestant Kingdom from a Papist King," Dryden expresses dismay over his opponent's phrase--the Right of Nature. "I know not what the Law of Nature," Dryden says, "has to do with Protestants or Papists," unless it can be shown that "the English nation is naturally Protestant." If, on the other hand, his opponent "means by the Law of Nature, self-preservation and defence," Dryden goes on, "I answer positively to what he would be at":

that the law of self-preservation empowers not a Subject to rise in Arms against his Sovereign, of another Religion, upon supposition of what he may do in his prejudice hereafter: [because] it is impossible that a moral certainty should be made out of a future contingency. . . . We read of a divine Command to obey Superior Powers; and the Duke will lawfully be such, no Bill of Exclusion having past against him in his Brother's life: Besides this, we have the Examples of Primitive Christians, even under Heathen Emperors, always suffering, yet never taking up Arms, during ten Persecutions. But we have no Text, no Primitive Example encouraging us to rebel against a Christian Prince; tho of a different persuasion. And to say there

were then no Christian Princes, when the New Testament was written, will avail our Author little; for the Argument is a fortiori: if it be unlawful to rebel against a Heathen Emperer, then much more against a Christian King. The corolary is this, and every unbiased sober man will subscribe to it, that since we cannot pry into the secret Decrees of God, for the knowledge of future Events, we ought to rely upon his Providence, for the Succession; without either plunging our present King into necessities, for what may never happen; or refusing our obedience to one hereafter, who in the course of nature may succeed him.<sup>64</sup>

I have quoted at length from this particular section of Dryden's tract because I think it represents the very core of his argument against Shaftesbury's party and because it suggests the kind of sacramental obligations associated with the kingship that Dryden and others apparently believed were in danger of being displaced by an aggressive and highly secular set of values--deeply tinted in the shades of Hobbes' characteristic propositions of self-preservation and brutish power. They believed the event of things--especially as it applied to the succession--was the special concern of providence, and the nation's interest should best be served by leaving it to providence. Any other course of action, it was thought, would render men and the nation at large, in John Tillotson's words, "incapable of judging what is safe, and avoiding what is dangerous. For God will leave them to themselves."<sup>65</sup>

[ iii ]

In Absalom and Achitophel Dryden has transposed the debate we have seen developing in the period over self-preservation and providence to a tapestry of figures and scenes from the Old and New

Testaments, particularly the account in Second Samuel of Absalom's rebellion against King David. The panels in this tapestry are arranged in such a way as to suggest, Professor Maynard Mack has written, "a confrontation of forces, executed--since the historical situation allows no decisive action in the poem--as an analysis of value, and especially the kind of value that can envisage rebellion against an anointed King."<sup>66</sup> A major section of the poem (45-752) relates the principal events of the crisis and catalogues the leading figures aligned in opposition to the kingship. From this first section, the poem moves to praise the few who have remained loyal to the King; and, thereby, to reaffirm the values Dryden associated with the idea of government and the values he believed were being affronted by the activities of Shaftesbury and his party.

*beginning of poem*

In the first glimpses we have of the world of Dryden's poem, interest threatens to displace justice, desire threatens duty, might threatens right, and all these symptoms of disorder stem from the underlying threat of a fundamental shift from a view of obligations based on divine and human laws to a view of obligations based on the acquisitive instincts of men, and a shift from a politics based on theological assumptions about man's created status to a "wholly secular philosophy based on gain."<sup>67</sup> In the world of Dryden's poem, then, the monarchy itself has become for some a kind of contrivance (64), something that can be made or melted down, an idol, or a "useless heavy Load" (505). The prerogatives of its King have a price, and his rights "for Sums of necessary Gold,/ Shall first be pawn'd and afterwards be Sold" (405-406). It is



a world, Dryden tells us, where the very structure of government has been "Crack'd" by the "Springs of Property" (500), and the servants of government have fallen victims to the winds of fortune and interest. It is a world glutted with household gods of every shape and size:

For Priests of all Religions are the same;  
Of whatsoever descent their Godhead be,  
Stock, Stone, or other homely pedigree,  
In his defence his Servants are as bold  
As if he had been born of beaten gold. (99-103)

It is a world where persons seem to become something less than human: an Achitophel who becomes the "fretted body of Ambition" or the father of some "shapeless lump" like "Anarchy"; a Zimri "so various" that he is "Not one," not even a man, but an "epitome"; Shimei, who has become as twisted as the "Chain of Gold" around his neck; and a Corah, self-appointed witness and "Monumental Brass." It is a world, finally, where men do move like atoms, "everything by starts and nothing long," where they do simply rise like factors of the moon, or flash as "comets" across the skies and fizzle back into the earth.

Dryden's presentation of these aggressive and possessive values, and his catalogue of the types who espouse them, form the satiric scene for the poem's central episode--the temptation of Absalom. And it is here that Dryden develops his protest against the characteristically Hobbesian proposition that rebellion may be justified by what Shaftesbury, in the person of Achitophel, calls nature's first law of self-preservation. This episode, critics have noticed, recalls in an ironic manner the temptation of Christ in the desert of Judea, a relationship Dryden establishes at the beginning of the

episode through Achitophel's travesty of Old Testament prophecies of a Messiah who will lead the Jews (i. e., the English) out of the wilderness of crisis and fear: "Their second Moses, whose extended Wand/ Divides the Seas, and shows the promis'd Land" (234-235). The relationship between Absalom and Christ is sustained throughout the episode, Professor Arthur Hoffman has written, "by the main theme of the temptation, power over one of the Kingdoms of the world," and the irony of the relationship is maintained by impressing upon the reader, in Hoffman's words, "the significant difference between Absalom and Christ, . . . that Absalom is the Messiah primarily in the mouth of Achitophel and of the people, a false Christ set up by Satan and accepted by the deceived populace, whereas Christ, rejected of men, is indeed the Son of God."<sup>68</sup>

In his first speech to Absalom (230-300), Achitophel makes several unconvincing gestures to the arbitrary basis of David's authority by suggesting that David was called to the throne by fortune and his own will to rule (263-265), and by appropriating the image of Lucifer's fall from paradise to describe David's fall from popular favor:

He is not now, as when on Jordan's Sand  
The Joyfull People throng'd to see him Land,  
Cov'ring the Beach, and Blackning all the Strand:  
But, like the Prince of Angels from his height,  
Comes tumbling downward with diminish'd light; . . .  
(270-274)

In the mouth of Achitophel, the image of Lucifer conveys a double irony. It reflects, of course, his propensity to slander and to abuse traditional meanings and associations; but, above all, it

suggests his conscious confusion of a legal and anointed authority with a de facto one. [As the speech progresses, moreover, it becomes clear that, for Achitophel at least, might is the sole basis of right. The time is ripe for Absalom to advance his claims upon the crown, Achitophel believes, merely because the king lacks the strength and will to oppose him: "What strength," he asks, "can he to your Designs oppose,/ Naked of Friends, and round beset with Foes?" (279-280) This wholly cynical response to the idea of government bobs to the surface again at the close of the speech when Achitophel bluntly rejects the argument for a legal succession, sanctioned by tradition and divine law, and describes it derisively as a "Successive Title, Long, and Dark,/ Drawn from the Mouldy Rolls of Noah's Ark" (301-302). Achitophel's words imply, as Professor Anne Davidson Ferry has written, that the "divine sanction for Kingship [is] a quaint antique survival and . . . 'Title' [is] merely a word written on a scroll."<sup>69</sup> His contemptuous tone, moreover, rebounds to his earlier and specious use of Lucifer's fall to describe David's, for Achitophel's description of hereditary kingship unmasks him as the real Satan in England's garden, recalling the arch fiend's equally contemptuous description of the Almighty in Paradise Lost as a "Monarch" who reigns "upheld by old repute,/Consent or custom"<sup>70</sup> (PL, I, 638-640). Achitophel's final appeal in the speech, again, rests on his peculiar and total service to the primacy of might:

What may not Israel hope, and what Applause  
Might such a General gain by such a Cause?  
Not barren Praise alone, that Gaudy Flower,  
Fair only to the sight, but solid Power:. . . (295-298)

Achitophel's portrayal of David in his first speech as an arbitrary King is so unconvincing that Absalom immediately rejects it, pleading the rightness and worth of his Father's reign:

What could he gain, his People to Betray,  
Or change his Right, for Arbitrary Sway?  
Let Haughty Pharoah Curse with such a Reign,  
His Fruitfull Nile, and Yoak a Servile Train.  
If David's Rule Jerusalem Displease,  
The Dog-star heats their Brains to this Disease. (329-334)

Absalom's answer, of course, impeaches all his subsequent actions against the kingship, but for the present it places Achitophel in a difficult position--justifying disloyalty to an essentially good and merciful King. To accomplish this, he chooses a line of argument strikingly similar to the arguments of the Hobbists, that the obligations of citizens must cease when the power to protect them fails: the King's mildness, Achitophel suggests, places the kingdom in serious danger. David's "mildness," his "grants" to the people--all "suppose a Monarch tame,/ And more his Goodness than his Wit proclaim":

But when should People strive their Bonds to break,  
If not when Kings are Negligent or Weak? (387-388)

Achitophel reiterates his thoroughly Hobbesian view of political obligation several lines later when he reminds Absalom that:

All Empire is no more than Pow'r in Trust,  
Which when resum'd, can be no longer Just.  
Succession, for the general Good design'd  
In its own wrong a Nation cannot bind: (411-414)

As Professor Ferry has noticed, Achitophel uses a form of definition here peculiar to Hobbes' style--no more than ("all Empire is no more than Pow'r in Trust"). This "contemptuous formula" occurs repeatedly in Hobbes' writings;<sup>71</sup> and, used as it is here to define

a purely contractual form of obligation, Dryden's readers would have been able, I think, to recognize Achitophel's remark as a distinctively Hobbesian gesture. Achitophel concludes his appeal to Absalom, moreover, with still another gesture to Hobbes, emphasizing the Duke of York's predatory and aggressive traits (441-454) and dramatizing them as an immediate threat to Absalom's life:

Your Case no tame Expedients will afford,  
Resolve on Death, or Conquest by the Sword,  
Which for no less a Stake than Life, you Draw;  
And Self-defence is Natures Eldest Law. (455-458)

The lines may be intended to recall Hobbes' famous pronouncement in Book I, Chapter XIV of the Leviathan, on the first "Right of nature as . . . the Liberty each man hath, to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own life,"<sup>72</sup>--a reference that seems wholly consistent with the appeal to expedience we have seen Dryden carefully threading through the entire web of Achitophel's two speeches.

While the appeal to "Self-defence" advances Achitophel's plea that Absalom save the nation and himself from the alleged ruin that is to come with the succession of the Duke of York, the egocentric and pragmatic connotations of such an appeal also accommodate the parallel Dryden has already established between Achitophel and Milton's Satan. Here it needs to be pointed out how Dryden has been emphasizing the satanic restlessness of Achitophel throughout the temptation episode. He is "impatient," Dryden tells us, "unpleased," and "Refuse[s] his Age the needful hours of Rest" (166). He is ever ready to seize the "occasion," and just as Satan continually prods Christ in Paradise Regained to work his own providence, Achitophel

prods Absalom to seize the occasion of the Popish plot, not to "detain," not to be content: "believe me, Royal youth, thy Fruit must be,/ Or gather'd Ripe, or rot upon the Tree" (250-251). We are reminded here of Satan's plea to Christ in Book III of Paradise Regained ("Thy years are ripe, and overripe"), and we are reminded of it again in the next lines when Achitophel urges Absalom to seize Fortune's "Locks" (261). The relevant passage also occurs in Book III of Paradise Regained: "If Kingdoms move thee not, let move thee Zeal/ And Duty; Zeal and Duty are not slow,/ But on occasion's forelock watchful wait." Throughout the entire episode Achitophel exploits this carpe diem theme, or, more precisely, what Northrop Frye has phrased, the "panic inspired by the ticking clock":<sup>73</sup>

Let his successfull Youth your hopes engage,  
But shun th' example of Declining Age: . . . (266-267)  
. . . . .  
Urge now your Piety, your Filial Name,  
A Father's Right, and fear of future Fame; . . . (419-420)  
. . . . .  
Leave the warm People no Considering time;  
For then Rebellion may be thought a Crime.  
Prevail your self of what Occasion gives, . . .  
(459-461)

This temptation to seize an occasion properly advances Absalom's transformation into an anti-Christ, for it constitutes a direct affront to the virtues of patience and trust in providence exemplified by Christ in Paradise Regained. While Christ's actions testify to the truth of the proposition in Ecclesiastes that God has assigned a time for all things, Absalom prefers, in the end, to take and make his own time, to be as it were his own providence. This presumptuous and egocentric role urged upon Absalom by Achitophel, moreover, devolves satirically to the whole political context of Dryden's

poem, condensing and dramatizing within a Christian moral order the efforts of Shaftesbury's party to seize an occasion, to make the times, and to advocate rebellion against an anointed authority on the basis of a future contingency--the pretence that only a Protestant successor, irrespective of his title, could secure the nation from tyranny and ruin. Deluded in this way, Absalom and the nation at large will be abandoned to the real threat of Achitophel and his party of malcontents. By tampering with the laws governing succession, by pressing forth a policy of discontent, and by pushing the legal props from beneath the monarchy, the kingdom, Dryden believed, would be consigned to the buffetings of chance or the whims of a disgruntled minority.

[iv]

The temptation episode, encased by a trenchant catalogue of the principal participants in the plot against the government, is connected to a second catalogue of those few loyal to the King by the narrator's own analysis of the principal issues.<sup>74</sup> In the course of this analysis, it becomes apparent that the narrator believes the question a moot one as to whether or not the kingdom should be called a patriarchy or a kind of "resuming Cov'nant" declared by the people. He seems willing, in fact, to make rather liberal concessions to an academic question of this kind ("grant our Lords the People Kings can make" 795), but he is not willing to relinquish his belief that the obligations implied by the institution of the kingship are circumscribed by vital truths about man's obligations to God. And without asserting a patriarchal theory of government he clearly glances

at the type of organic and hallowed connections which formed the  
very underpinnings of that theory:<sup>75</sup>

If those who gave the Scepter, could not tye  
By their own deed their own Posterity,  
How then could Adam bind his future Race?  
How could his forfeit on mankind take place?  
Or how could heavenly Justice damn us all,  
Who nere consented to our Fathers fall? (769-774)

The questions suggest, of course, that men are subject to a set of  
prior obligations imprinted on their souls and bound up with their  
status as sons of Adam, and these same questions provide a ground  
for the narrator's description of the government as a sacred insti-  
tution binding God, King, parliament and the people, a building  
that may need patching from time to time but should never be de-  
molished in the process:

If ancient Fabricks nod, and threat to fall,  
To Patch the Flaws, and Buttress up the Wall,  
Thus far 'tis Duty; but here fix the Mark:  
For all beyond it is to touch our Ark'.  
To change Foundations, cast the Frame anew,  
Is work for Rebels who base Ends pursue:  
At once Divine and Humane Laws controul;  
And mend the Parts by ruine of the Whole. (801-808)

The reference here to the ark is particularly crucial. As the chest  
described in scripture (Exod. XXXVII-1, Psalm CXXXII-8) containing  
the tables of the old law and as the seat of the powerful and glor-  
ious presence of the Godhead on earth, the ark affirms the narrator's  
belief in an intimate and lasting relationship between God and the  
nation, and supplies one more link between the guardianship held by  
English kings over the constitution of the government and the guard-  
ianship claimed by Israel's great king over the ark. For David's  
significant achievement as king of the Jews was to bring the ark

ark ✓



to Jerusalem and enshrine it there in a temple--a focus for the unity, nationhood, and chosen status of the Jewish people. The association between ark and temple, then, seems to press further the narrator's belief in the sacramental value of his government; and, as Professor Allen Roper recently pointed out, the effect of the ark reference is "to convert the anonymous building of the preceding couplet [i.e., the constitution of the government] into the temple and consequently to realize the full spacial potential of [the word] beyond. Amendment should cease with repair and the Temple's outer walls, to penetrate beyond the walls to the Holy of Holies is sacreligious rebellion and high treason."<sup>76</sup>

The passage functions as a pivotal point in Dryden's poem; and, appropriately, it draws together the poem's imagery of temples, hills, palaces, and housings--all associated with the idea of government as a kind of apex mundi. The nation as a body politic or microcosm, the holy hill of Sion where David reigns, the constitution he upholds as the very temple of scripture connecting the terrestrial Jerusalem with the celestial one, and the temple-shaped bier that draws a dead hero to his final rest (857)--all converge on this passage, and all of them seem to be drawn from a long-standing tradition, whereby architectonics symbolize the "meeting point of heaven, earth, and hell."<sup>77</sup> The order of the government, then, with the monarchy as its center, becomes a primary emblem in Absalom and Achitophel of the relationship between God and his people; furthermore, the order specifies their duties, and prescribes those cares

✓ opening

they should best leave to the operations of His providence.

Counterpointing such religious emblems for the values of government and order, one finds expressions, too, of the narrator's total amazement at the folly of a nation presuming to unsettle a stable order and to be its own providence in the face of purely "contingent mischiefs":

Did ever men forsake their present ease,  
In midst of health Imagine a disease;  
Take pains Contingent mischiefs to foresee,  
Make Heirs for Monarks, and for God decree? (755-758)

The narrator's comments tie in nicely with, and become a comment on, such motions of discontent, and temptations to tamper with time we have seen modulating through the episode of Absalom's fall; while his comments recall, as well, the responses of the Anglican divines in the period, who saw in their analogies between Israel and England a common and, in Symon Patrick's words, a "fatal stupidity" about the providence of God; a common propensity to fault His wisdom, cheapen His mercy, resist His grace, and fall to the worship of idols--the highest form of treason. By usurping the prerogatives of a king, and by extension the providence of God, in this way, the nation, it was thought, would fall to a "fickle rout" or to the mad motions of a world abandoned to the status of things and subjected to brutish, blind, and necessary forces:

What Standard is there in a fickle rout,  
Which, flowing to the mark, runs faster out?  
Nor only Crowds, but Sanhedrins may be  
Infected with this publick Lunacy:  
And Share the madness of Rebellious times,  
To Murder Monarchs for Imagin'd crimes.  
If they may Give and Take when e'r they please,  
Not Kings alone, (the Godheads Images,)  
But Government it self at length must fall  
To Natures state; where all have Right to all. (785-794)

The passage focuses our attention, again, on the consequences of innovation and suggests through the image of the tides that when men act in this way they lose the surety of God's care and tempt the dangers of a giddy, lunar station in life, devoid of any saving grace. Significantly, the narrator concludes his account of the consequences which may come of this crisis in values with a gesture to Hobbes' famous description of man in a state of nature. It is particularly significant, I think, in the light of all we have learned thus far about the Hobbesian shadings Dryden apparently associated with the opposition to kingship in England, that the gesture to Hobbes is an ironic one. For the passage creates a sly inversion of Hobbes' argument, suggesting that men do not rise from a "nasty and brutish" state of nature by a kind of expediential covenant; rather, men often fall into such a state of nature by way of rebellion against their status as men and creatures of God, and by way of destroying a sacred bond and consigning the gift of dominion to the level of natural forces. As Dryden emphasized again some years later in The Hind and the Panther:

Beasts are the subjects of Tyrannic sway;  
Where still the stronger on the weaker prey.  
Man only of a softer mold is made,  
Not for his fellows ruin, but their aid:  
Created kind, beneficent, and free,  
The noble image of the Deity. (HP, 245-250)

The narrator's apologia for those sacramental obligations symbolized by the kingship advances Dryden's protest against the highly secular and egocentric philosophy of government espoused by Shaftesbury's party one step further towards its final and in some

ways its most subtle phase--an encomium to those few still loyal to the King. The decisive unit in this last section of the poem involves an elegy in memory of Thomas Butler, the Earl of Ossery, who had distinguished himself in wars against the Dutch and French and who unexpectedly died from a fever in 1680. As critics have noticed, Dryden's treatment of Thomas and his father, James Butler, the Duke of Ormonde (Barzillai) functions as a foil to the strained relationship between Absalom and David. Barzillai and his son, in other words, characterize a truly noble kind of familial relationship used so often in the Renaissance to epitomize the virtues and perfections of the ideal of a civilized community. Important as this contrast may be in the poem, however, it should not distract us from Dryden's underlying strategy, and the principal thrust of his argument. For the story of Barzillai's son provides a remarkable emblem of the mysterious counterpoise of providence and human freedom that circumscribes man's world, and the story should be understood, it seems to me, as a subtle response to the opposition's arrogant claims of power over, not simply the future of one life, but over the life of an entire nation. To put Dryden's argument in its baldest terms: if God in His providence when He so wishes can take the life of one good man, He most certainly will exercise an influence over the future of a whole nation where the cause is so general. At the same time, Dryden's elegy to the memory of Barzillai's son dramatizes an important paradox in the Christian view of man--quite opposed to Hobbes' univocal view--the paradox that a man may preserve his life by losing it.

Dryden begins by despising Barzillai's son as the very glass of nobility, a man with all the advantages of family, wealth, intelligence, and military prowess:

By Sea, by Land, thy Matchless Worth was known;  
Arms thy Delight, and War was all thy Own:  
Thy force, Infus'd, the fainting Tyrans prop'd:  
And Haughty Pharoah found his Fortune stop'd.  
Oh Ancient Honour, Oh Unconquer'd Hand,  
Whom Foes unpunish'd never could withstand! (840-845)

Yet withal these strengths and virtues, this noble figure is "snatched in Manhood's prime." Our first response and the narrator's, also, is to rage a little against such "unequal Fates, and Providences crime":

It looks as Heaven our Ruine had design'd,  
And durst not trust thy Fortune and thy Mind. (848-849)

Had Dryden stopped at this point in his report of the loss, unexpected and uncalled for, it would have still served as a pointed answer to Shaftesbury's grandiose claims of an all but omnipotent power over the nation's future. Dryden continues, however, and takes his argument to still another level of human experience. And just along the leading edge of his conventional elegiac lament, he threads his theme of consolation. Barzillai's son has died, he tells us, but not "before the Goal of Honour won":

All parts fulfill'd of Subject and of Son;  
Swift was the Race, but short the Time to run.  
Oh Narrow Circle, but of Pow'r Divine,  
Scanted in Space, but perfect in thy Line! (836-839)

The yoking here of the image of life as a race (with its connotations of thrust and temporality) and the image of perfection as a circle (with its connotations of containment and eternity) have the same

effect as Crashaw's famous and highly condensed paradox of Christ incarnate: "AEternity shutt in a span./ Sommer in Winter. Day in Night./ Heaven in earth, and GOD in MAN."<sup>78</sup> And like so many of Dryden's elegies, as Professor Arthur Hoffman has put it so finely and precisely, "praise of the dead is modulated into praise of the victor, the material defeat modulated into achieved victory, . . . creating a final counterpoise of man's will and man's fate, of Art and Nature."<sup>79</sup> Significantly, too, the image of the Son fulfilling in time the will of the Father, and mediating through the very shortness of his time for a lasting perfection, glances back like a shaft of light to the activities of Absalom fulfilling the role of a pseudo son and abusing his time in exchange for a mere temporary fame. Barzillai's son, on the other hand, "decreed" as it were by "loss to gain,"<sup>80</sup> achieves an eternal victory, and thereby provides the pattern for David's final victory as well:

Now, free from Earth, thy disencumbred Soul  
Mounts up, and leaves behind the Clouds and Starry Pole:  
From thence thy kindred legions mayst thou bring  
To aid the guardian Angel of thy King. (850-853)

This is Dryden's last and most appropriate answer, I think, to the peculiarly Hobbesian propositions that only might makes right, that the only measure of perfection is success, or that man's only good is the will to preserve himself. It is the best explanation Dryden gives us in the poem, too, for its perplexing distribution of people and events wherein victory finally belongs not to the strongest, the loudest, the faction with the wisest statesmen, or the greatest numbers, but to the bravest and the best, and the few

God has honored with the rights and privileges of office. The very shape of the poem, favoring as it does the great weight and number of the enemy, suggests a divine factor and mysterious proportion in the nature of things, whereby one brave man may turn the balance to the better side (886). By playing throughout the poem upon the special strengths of weakness, by emphasizing (through an accumulation of such phrases as "heaps of people," "heaped affronts," "heaping wealth," "loads of injuries," "burthens for a camel," "weight of business," and "solid power") the full threat of a de facto power bearing down upon an established and hallowed order, by bringing to the fore the many figures aligned against the kingship, and by summarily describing their demise, Dryden turns the poem into a remarkable witness to the ways providence arranges the patterns of victory and defeat. As the Rev. Isaac Barrow argued several years before the crisis erupted: when "by weak forces great feats are accomplished and impotency triumpheth over might," when "the most perspicacious and profound counsellors are so blinded," when "profane, malicious, subtle, treacherous politicians (such as Abimelech, Achitophel, Haman, Sejanus, Stilico, Borgia, with many like occurring in story) are not only supplanted in their wicked contrivances, but dismally chastised for them," when "plots" are "brought to light," when "any pernicious enterprise levelled against the safety of prince and people, is disappointed," when "divers odd accidents do befall at a seasonable time, according to exigency for the public benefit, the preservation of princes, the maintenance of truth and piety, according to

the wishes and prayers of good men, with proper retribution and vengeance upon the wretched designers of mischief; such a complication . . . in one event may thoroughly suffice to raise a firm persuasion, to force a confident acknowledgment concerning God's providence, in any considerate and ingenuous person: it readily will dispose such persons upon any occasion to say: This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes."<sup>81</sup>



## NOTES

1. "To His Grace the Duke of Ormond, Etc.," in The Works of John Dryden, ed. by Sir Walter Scott, rev. by George Saintesbury (Edinburgh, 1883), V, 10-11.
2. Louis Teeter, "The Dramatic use of Hobbes' Political Ideas," ELH, III (1936), 140-169, and John A. Winterbottom, "The Place of Hobbesian Ideas in Dryden's Tragedies," JEGP, LVIII (1958), provide valuable insights into the problem of Dryden's use of Hobbesian thought, but both articles are restricted to the plays. James Kinsley has noted several allusions in Absalom and Achitophel to Hobbes' Leviathan, but no one, to my knowledge, has explained the implications of these allusions for the direction of Dryden's satire in the poem. Bernard N. Schilling in Dryden and the Conservative Myth: A Reading of Absalom and Achitophel (New Haven, 1961), has pointed out some similarities between Dryden's conservatism and Hobbes', but, on the whole, he apparently considers Hobbes' politics irrelevant to an understanding of Dryden's work.
3. James E. Wellington, "Conflicting Concepts of Man in Dryden's Absalom and Achitophel," Satire Newsletter, IV (1966), 4, describes Dryden's views in the poem as "partly Hobbesian," while R. L. Brett, "Thomas Hobbes," in The English Mind: Studies in the English Moralists Presented to Basil Willey, ed. by Hugh Sykes Davies and George Watson (Cambridge, 1964), p. 52, says that while Absalom and Achitophel contains "echoes of Milton" the poem's "total effect owes more to Hobbes."
4. Charles E. Ward, The Life of John Dryden (Chapel Hill, 1961), p. 152. Alan Roper, in his discussion of Dryden's The Medall, in Dryden's Poetic Kingdoms (New York, 1965), p. 95, has stated one facet of the case I intend to make in this chapter: "As might be expected," he says, "the arch opponent of Dryden, as of any orthodox royalist at this time, was Hobbes; to be more precise, perhaps, it was Hobbism, that theory of supreme authority based upon extracts from the more voluntaristic passages in Leviathan."
5. Thomas F. Mayo, Epicurus in England (College Station, Texas, 1934), p. 143.
6. Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan or the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth-Ecclesiastical and Civil, ed. with an intro. by Michael Oakshott (Oxford, 1960), p. 85.

7. Ibid., p. 84
8. Ibid., p. 85.
9. Ibid., p. 87.
10. Ibid., p. 112.
11. Quentin Skinner, "The Ideological Context of Hobbes' Political Thought," The Historical Journal, IX (1966), 308.
12. Hobbes, p. 144.
13. Skinner, pp. 315-316.
14. Edward Hyde, 1st Earl of Clarendon, A brief view and survey of the dangerous and pernicious errors to church and state, in Mr. Hobbes' book entitled Leviathan (Oxford, 1676), p. 90.
15. Ibid., p. 166.
16. William Falkner, Christian loyalty (London, 1679), pp. 409-410.
17. Ibid., p. 400.
18. Skinner, p. 294. Samuel I. Mintz, The Hunting of Leviathan (Cambridge, 1962) and George Bowle, Hobbes and his Critics (London, 1951) both underestimate the degree of Hobbes' popularity in England.
19. John Eachard, Some opinions of Mr. Hobbes considered (London, 1673), p. 3. Cited by Skinner, p. 296. Dryden once remarked that the "keen edge" of Eachard's irony "has more baffled the Philosopher of Malmesbury than those who assaulted him with blunt, heavy arguments drawn from orthodox divinity. For Hobbes, Foresaw where those strikes would fall, and leapt aside before they could descend; but he could not avoid those nimble passes [of Eachard] which were within his body before he could provide for his defence." See The Works, XVIII, 77.
20. Richard Baxter, The second part of the Non-conformists plea for peace (London, 1680), p. 8, cited by Skinner, p. 296.
21. Skinner, p. 311.
22. Ibid.
23. Clarendon, p. 5.
24. Ibid., p. 60.

25. For accounts of the Popish Plot and its bearing on the exclusion crisis see Francis S. Ronalds, The Attempted Whig Revolution of 1678-1681 (Urbana, 1937), and K. H. D. Haley, The First Earl of Shaftesbury (Oxford, 1968), pp. 453-468.

26. Gilbert Burnet, History of My Own Times, ed. by Osmund Airy (Oxford, 1900), II, 214.

27. Thomas Hunt, The great and weighty considerations, relating to the Duke of York (London, 1680), pp. 5-13.

28. Dryden himself was tagged a Hobbist, and John Aubrey in his Brief Lives, ed. by Andrew Clark (Oxford, 1898), p. 372, describes the poet as Hobbes' "great admirer, [who] oftentimes makes use of his doctrines in his plays--from Mr. Dryden himself." Aubrey's remarks have always been the nub of allegations that Dryden was sympathetic to the Philosopher's views. It should be noted, however, that Aubrey's purpose in the biography is to defend Hobbes, and to offset his "many enemies" with some testimony of his "ingenious and learned friends." Nor does Aubrey suggest anywhere that Dryden agreed with Hobbes--only that he admired the Philosopher and used his ideas in his plays. Another contemporary source, given in evidence to support claims Dryden was a Hobbist, is a tract by an actor in the Duke of York's Company, Richard Leigh. Leigh's Censure of the Rota (Oxford, 1673), however, is an obvious slander on Dryden and would hardly support the thesis that the poet was a Hobbist.

29. Skinner, p. 315. So common was this interpretation of Hobbes that in 1683, when the University of Oxford issued a public condemnation of certain seditious works, it cited Hobbes' writings as the source and only source for a theory of obligation based on self-preservation. The seventh entry in the Oxford decree reads as follows: "Self-preservation is the fundamental law of nature and supercedes the obligation of all others, whensoever they stand in competition with it. Hobbes, De Cive, Leviathan." See The Judgment and Decree of the University of Oxford, passed in their Convocation, July 2, 1683, . . . in The Somers's Tracts ed. by Walter Scott (London, 1812), VIII, 420-424.

It has been suggested by Howard Warrender, in The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: His Theory of Obligation (Oxford, 1957), that Hobbes deliberately overstated his case, and was completely misread by his contemporaries. Warrender believes Hobbes' view of obligation is grounded in a theory of natural law and predicated on a Divine Command. I agree with Skinner, p. 314, who finds this novel reading of Hobbes "historically incredible. If Hobbes intended to ground political obligations on a prior obligation to obey the commands of God, it follows that every contemporary--every follower, opponent, sympathizer--all equally missed the point of his political doctrine, all of them, moreover, (a remarkable chance) were mistaken in exactly the same way."

30. See Howard H. Schless, Poems on Affairs of State: Augustan Satirical Verse, 1660-1714 (New Haven, 1968), III, 265, n. 34. Haley, p. 219, notes that Shaftesbury had been reading Hobbes in 1676, but the Earl's response to Hobbes' view remain unknown.

31. Edward N. Hooker, "Dryden and the Atoms of Epicurus," in Dryden: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by Bernard N. Schilling (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1963), p. 129.

32. Dryden's relationship with Blount has been examined by Phillip Harth, Contexts of Dryden's Thought (Chicago, 1968), pp. 73-77. Before drifting into Deism, Blount had been an avowed follower of Hobbes. At the time of the exclusion crisis, he wrote a highly inflammatory attack on the government (An appeal from the country to the city, for the preservation of His Majesties person, London, 1679), and "bestowed" a "succession of public compliments" on Dryden in several other "offensive" works. "To Dryden, already worried by accusations of impiety and even atheism, it can only have been an embarrassment to be . . . made partner with Hobbes in these unsolicited testimonials of Blount's admiration."

33. William Cavendish, 1st Duke of Devonshire, Reasons for his Majesty's passing the Bill of Exclusion. In a Letter to a Friend, in Somers's Tracts, VIII, 213.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., p. 216.

36. W. H. Greenleaf, Order, Empiricism and Politics: Two Traditions of English Political Thought, 1500-1700 (London, 1964), p. 121. Dryden's abiding belief in the constitution of his government is recorded in his Dedication of Aeneis. An "honest man," he says, "ought to be contented with the form of government, with those constitutions of it which he received from his ancestors, and under which he himself was born." See The Poems of John Dryden, ed. by James Kinsley (Oxford, 1958), III, 1014. All subsequent references to Dryden's poetry are according to this edition.

37. John Tillotson, Sermons on Several Subjects and Occasions (London, 1748), VII, 148.

38. The phrase is Richard Hooker's, in The Works, ed. by John Keble (London, 1888), II, 565.

39. Don Cameron Allen discusses the background of the doctrine of providence and notes its importance in the seventeenth century in his Doubt's Boundless Sea: Skepticism and Faith in the Renaissance (Baltimore, 1964), pp. 140-149. A valuable analysis of its importance in the Middle Ages can be found in Etienne Gilson, The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy, trans. by A. H. C. Downes (New York, 1940),

pp. 148-167. For recent studies stressing the importance of the doctrine in the Restoration and Augustan periods see the unpublished dissertation by Charles H. Peake, "Domestic Tragedy in Relation to Theology in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century," University of Michigan (Ann Arbor, 1941), pp. 1-78; Gerald M. Straka, Anglican Reaction to the Revolution of 1688 (Madison, 1962), pp. 65-79, and two articles by Aubrey Williams: "Congreve's Incognita and the Contrivances of Providence," in Imagined Worlds: Essays on Some English Novels and Novelists in Honour of John Butt, ed. by Maynard Mack and Ian Gregor (London, 1968), pp. 3-17, and "Poetic Justice, the Contrivances of Providence and the Works of William Congreve," ELH, XXXV (1968), 540-565. Providence in Puritan thought and literature has been studied by Perry Miller, The New England Mind (New York, 1939), reprinted, 1961, Beacon Press: Beacon Paperback, I, 228-231, and by J. Paul Hunter, The Reluctant Pilgrim: Defoe's Emblematic Method and Quest for Form in Robinson Crusoe (Baltimore, 1966), pp. 51-75.

40. Henry H. Adams, English Domestic or Homiletic Tragedy, 1575-1642 (New York, 1943), pp. 1-35.

41. Herschel Baker, The Wars of Truth: Studies in the Decay of Christian Humanism in the Earlier Seventeenth Century (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), p. 17.

42. Thomas Fuller, The Holy State and the Profane State, ed. by M. G. Walton (London, 1938), v, p. 6. Cited by Baker, p. 22.

43. R. S. Crane, "Anglican Apologetics and the Idea of Progress, 1699-1745," MP, XXXI (1934), 281.

44. Tillotson, III, 21.

45. Matthew Hale, The primitive origination of mankind considered and examined according to the light of nature (London, 1677), p. 35.

46. Miller, p. 231.

47. Hale, p. 37.

48. Ibid., p. 39.

49. Robert South, Forty-Eight Sermons (London, 1715), I, 124.

50. Ibid., p. 304.

51. The Poems, I, 124.

52. Isaac Barrow, The Theological Works, ed. by Alexander Napier (Cambridge, 1859), I, 464.

53. Henry King, A Sermon Preached on . . . the 29th of May (London, 1661), p. 22.

54. Tillotson, I, 40.
55. Frances Atterbury, Forty Three Sermons and Discourses on Several Subjects and Occasions (London, 1723), pp. 130-131.
56. Tillotson, I, 40.
57. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Coronation Afterthoughts," Christian Century, LXX (July, 1953), 771.
58. Barrow, III, 466.
59. Anonymous, A Letter from a Person of Quality in Scotland to a Person of Honour in London, . . . in The Somers's Tracts, VIII, 294.
60. Ward, p. 155.
61. Anonymous, Great and Weighty Considerations Relating to the . . . Succession of the Crown (London, 1679), p. 3.
62. Barrow, I, 435.
63. Ibid.
64. John Dryden, His Majesties Declaration Defended (1681), in Augustan Reprint Society Publications (Los Angeles, 1950), No. 23, p. 12.
65. Tillotson, I, 180.
66. Maynard Mack, ed., The Augustans (second edition; Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1962), p. 8.
67. Ibid.
68. Arthur Hoffman, John Dryden's Imagery (Gainesville, Fla., 1962), p. 83.
69. Anne Davidson Ferry, Milton and the Miltonic Dryden (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), p. 64.
70. John Milton, Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. by Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1957), p. 277. All subsequent references to Milton's works are according to this text.
71. Ferry, p. 64.
72. Wellington, p. 8, believes the line is an echo of a line from Milton's The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates: "They tells us that the Law of nature justifies any man to defend himself, ev'n against the King in Person." But the operative term in Achitophel's

remark is Eldest: "And Self-defence is Nature's Eldest Law." No one in the seventeenth century, or any century for that matter, would have argued with the view that nature obliges a man to do all in his power to preserve his life. See Falkner, cited above, p. 400. They did believe, however, that Hobbes had carried the argument too far, pronouncing self-preservation to be the "first law" of nature. In this respect, Hobbes' view differs from the view of Milton and others who had made the plea of self-defence against the government of Charles I in 1641. To my knowledge, at least, Milton never invoked "self-defence" as the first law of nature.

Dryden, on the other hand, did see certain similarities between Hobbes' pronouncements on obligation and those of that "Godly Faction, . . . Cowering and Quaking at a Conqueror's Sword, / But Lofty to a Lawful Prince Restor'd (AA, 515-516). And in his Epistle to the Whigs (The Poems, p. 251), Dryden says he is "able to prove from the doctrine of Calvin that they [the sects] set the people above the magistrate, and . . . this carries [one's] loyalty no further than [one's] liking." There is apparently some historical basis for Dryden's response. In a recent study of radical politics in the seventeenth century, Professor Michael Walzer suggests that there is a strong affinity between Calvin's views on obligation and those of Hobbes, which provided the extreme sects in England with a weapon against the monarchy. "Calvin," according to Walzer, "ignored the Medieval distinction between rulers and usurpers; in fact he condemned any effort to make lawful distinctions: 'It belongeth not to us to be enquisitive by what right and title a prince reigneth. . . . and whether he have it by good and lawful inheritance.'" Calvin argued further that "a particular sovereign was only to be obeyed so long as he possessed the power to impose obedience; . . . his legitimacy could not survive his defeat, for a defeated sovereign was disposed by God." As he suggested in his dedication to the Duke of Ormonde (The Works, V, 10), Dryden found little difference between this description of obligation and Hobbes'. Hobbists and Saints alike would subject the kingdom to arbitrary rule; one at the hands of a factious element, the other at the will of a capricious God. See Michael Walzer, The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), p. 38.

73. Northrop Frye makes the point in "The Typology of Paradise Regained," in Milton: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. by Arthur E. Barker (New York, 1965), p. 441. I have used his phrase, to be one's "own providence," throughout this chapter.

74. The narrator's urbanity, wit, his modulations from a formal to a colloquial mode of speech, even his occasional irreverence, should not distract us from his more deeply felt responses to the whole crazy quilt of motives, circumstances, and paradoxes sewn into the situation: the plot within a plot, the warring factions masquerading in the cause of peace, and the unholy prospect of an entire nation ruined in the name of religion. Nor should his sometimes easy and witty manner distract us from his understanding of

the twisted values espoused by the figures who move through the world of the poem: the people who "thought that all but Savages were Slaves" (56), the statesmen who would prefer "Fortune's Ice" to "Virtues Land" (199), the nobility debilitated by their own exhausting efforts to achieve the status of "Buffoon[s]" (550). The hypocrisy of Zealots who would only from "Expensive Sins refrain," and break "the Sabbath but for Gain" (588), and, finally, a Priesthood turned Priestcraft--fearing to lose only the "Fleece" that "accompanies the Flock" (129). From the very beginning Dryden has been carefully shaping the character of his narrator and gradually establishing his integrity as a witness to the major events and figures involved in the crisis. For all we know, he is one for whom preciousness or an affected sense of moral outrage would be unsuitable, but, also, one for whom the values of loyalty and charity still matter. And never in the poem does Dryden lead us to doubt the essential honesty and judiciousness of his narrator. He refuses to blink at the weaknesses of his King, stressing David's propensity to indolence and pleasure, and showing how fatal a monarch's prerogative of mercy can become, when it murders the good by allowing the bad to flourish. Nor does he fail to point out the virtues of the King's principal adversary, Achiophel:

In Israels courts ne'r sat an Abbethdin  
With more discerning Eyes, or Hands more clean:  
Unbrib'd, unsought, the Wretched to redress;  
Swift of Dispatch, and easie of Access. (188-191)

When the narrator finally pauses here in his account of the plot at line 752 and provides us with an analysis of the issues and values raised by Achiophel's assault on the kingship, therefore, most of these gestures to his character are behind us, and we are inclined to trust his judgment and respect his word.

75. The most popular source for a Patriarchal theory of government in the period was Sir Robert Filmer's Patriarcha, ed. by Peter Laslett (Oxford, 1949). I have found no evidence to connect Dryden with Filmer. The idea of the paternal origins and character of government, on the other hand, is very old, and Dryden uses the language of this tradition throughout his poetry. cf. Martin Price, To The Palace of Wisdom (New York, 1964), pp. 52-62.

76. Roper, pp. 17-18.

77. Mircea Eliade, Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return, trans. by Willard R. Trask, published first in 1954 under the title, The Myth of the Eternal Return, reprinted, 1959, Harper & Brothers: Torchbook Series, p. 12.

78. Richard Crashaw, The Poems, ed. by L. C. Martin (Oxford, 1957), p. 250, lines 80-82.

79. Hoffman, pp. 97-98.



80. The phrase is from Dryden's translation of Ovid's Meta-  
morphoses, Book XV: "Rais'd by the fall; Decreed by Loss to Gain;/  
Enslav'd but to be free, and conquer'd but to reign." See The Poems  
IV, 1735, lines 667-668.

81. Barrow, I, 465-471.

## II

### THE KINGSHIP

And to inflict a plague on David's  
sinne, He makes his bowels traitors  
to his breast, winding about his  
heart with mortall gripes.

George Peele (1599)

[i]

John Dryden's decision to create the immediate metaphor of his poem from a wide spectrum of scenes and events in the Old Testament history of the Jews, and, particularly, from the story in Samuel of David and Absalom, was by far the most crucial one he made while composing his poem. Throughout the Renaissance, of course, men had been turning to the Old Testament for political instruction, turning to that "scene or stage," as Bishop Andrewes described it, "wherein the errors or virtues of all governments were represented to all posterity."<sup>1</sup> And apparently it was a common practice of the orthodox in the years leading up to the Oxford parliament of 1681 to dramatize an ominous "Hebraic factor"<sup>2</sup> in English affairs. At the time of the exclusion crisis, for example, amid rumors of a Popish Plot, Symon Patrick noticed "[Israel's] condition [to be] so like . . . ours in England; that he is a man of little observation, and slow conception, who is not able to draw the resemblance. If I should endeavour to express to the life how God dealt with them, and how He corrected them for their Ingratitude; you would say,

this is England under other names; or, Here is Israel again revived. The same things are acted over again in the world; only the Scene is changed, and new Persons come upon the Stage."<sup>3</sup> By drawing from the Bible as the great source book of situations between God and nations, Professor Arthur Hoffman has reminded us, Dryden and others were able to "set English history in a moral order," extending the terms of their poems, sermons, and tracts "to embody the full moral order of Christian theology, and it is [always] in terms of that moral order that a part of English history is judged."<sup>4</sup>

Dryden's decision to focus particularly on the David story, critics have noticed, was equally conventional. David's fortunes had been applied to those of Charles by countless preachers and poets at the time of the Restoration, and Dryden himself had made the connection between the two kings in his Astrea Redux (79-82). In the 1670's, the growth of opposition to the kingship, together with the use Shaftesbury's party made of the Popish Plot and Monmouth's claims to the crown, "increased the potentialities of the story of David and Absalom as political allegory."<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the story of Absalom's rebellion began to appear in pamphlets and broadsides with increasing frequency from 1677 to 1681. Dryden may have been prompted by these examples, or prompted, too, by the dramatist Nathaniel Lee, who urged (in verses on The State of Innocence) the poet laureate to "set down" the "troubles of Majestick CHARLES," and to "Praise Him, as Cowly did that Hebrew King."<sup>6</sup>

Professor Bernard Schilling has shown, moreover, the ways in the period the "right Kingly qualities settle upon" the figure of

David, "so that when the time [comes] to restore Charles II he can be compared to David . . . with the desired effect."<sup>7</sup> David's virtues,<sup>7</sup> Schilling goes on, "are fully established as the one's Charles is supposed as King to have. The presentation of David stresses resemblance to God as father, as judge, or as supreme monarch standing against his enemies. He practices repeatedly the virtues of mercy, patience, and forgiveness and shows himself as an indulgent father in the last degree."<sup>8</sup> Schilling concedes almost casually that the poem, in his reading, "seems to adhere more to the myth than to the facts about the King himself." For Charles was, in fact, "lazy, . . . much too tolerant, and he was other things as well, of which the poem says nothing."<sup>9</sup> Professor Schilling's remarks seem consistent with a prevailing tendency or emphasis in appraisals of Absalom and Achitophel to the effect that Dryden was disposed to make large concessions to the character of Charles II<sup>10</sup> and did so at the very outset of his poem by submerging the whole libertine atmosphere of the Restoration court into a pious and polygamous past. Some perhaps would go as far as to agree with Schilling's insistence that the very "faulty human being" depicted in the opening lines of Dryden's poem is "quite pointless." The myth, Schilling argues, dictates that "the King must not be condemned for promiscuity. . . . The illegitimacy is passed off not as another sign of the King's scandalous immorality but as following from polygamy. A question was never more neatly begged, nor was it ever more clearly suggested that the question is in fact pointless and should never be raised in the first place."<sup>11</sup>

While it does seem reasonable to believe that Dryden, in fact,

did make concessions to the character of Charles II, and while in the context of Dryden's vindication of the principle of kingship against the principle of rebellion espoused by Shaftesbury, Charles' private life should in some ways be considered quite beside the point, I am not at all satisfied that the gestures the poet does make to the King's indolence and licentiousness are entirely unrelated to the patterning of figures and events in the poem. It seems just as reasonable to assume that the poem is complex enough and artful enough to accomodate the King both as a "faulty human being" and as a persona publica and image of the Godhead--just as the tradition whence Dryden drew his material for Absalom and Achitophel was resilient enough to absorb both the human and divine dimensions of the David figure. I want to examine, then, some of the ways Dryden establishes a connection in the poem between the dissipated power and sexual disorder of David's house and the civil disorder of David's kingdom, a pattern in the poem that is fully supported by earlier treatments of this biblical King whose life so forcefully dramatized the ways providence often "proves" the best of men.<sup>12</sup>

[ii]

Doubts about the flexibility and strength of the David figure in English thought--its tenacity to anchor both a "cautionary and typological attitude" toward the biblical King--should be dispelled by Professor Inga-Stina Ewbank's recent study of the "House of David in Renaissance Drama."<sup>13</sup> In the Renaissance, she has pointed out, David was the subject of countless poems, plays, sermons, and conduct books. As the lover of Bathsheba, he provided material for

Petrarch's verses on the triumphs of love, and provided later court poets with one more scene of Ovidian pleasure.<sup>14</sup> The "David and Bathsheba motif" in both the poetical and "the pictorial arts," she says, tended "to fuse with classical motifs, especially that of Venus and Adonis, into an image of earthly beauty" and sensual delight.<sup>15</sup> And it was as the lover of Bathsheba, too, that David became "an exemplum to illustrate one of the great medieval moral-satirical themes," as in works on the order of Ravisius Textor's dialogues, where David's sin is "linked with Adam's as well as that of the heroes of classical myth and history."<sup>16</sup> George Peele's David and Bathsabe [sic], to cite another early treatment, not only dramatizes David's sins but also dramatizes the disorders of David's kingdom as the consequence of such sins and such abuses of power. The play, Professor Ewbank goes on, illustrates "one of the fascinations David's story held for the contemporary mind"; that is, "its more extended moral perspective: the sin of the father being visited on the children and hence revisited onto the father himself. To some, David seemed the ideal hero of a moral tragedy; while on the one hand he was a 'most mightie King, and . . . most holie Prophet,' the fortunes of his House, on the other hand, formed an unequaled monument of so many heinous crimes proceeding out of one fact."<sup>17</sup>

Heinrich Bullinger, writing on The Christian State of Matrimonye, translated by Myles Coverdale in 1541, describes the retributive patterning of events in David's life as follows: "Even as he had dishonoured another mans childe/ so sawe he shame upon his owne children

while he lyved/ and that with greate wrechednesse. For Ammon defloured Thamar his awne naturall sister. And they were Davids children/ Yet Absalom did miserably slaye Ammon his brother/ . . . And not long after/ dyd the same Absalom dryve his own naturall father David out of his realme/ & shamefully lay with his fathers wives. Whereupon there followed an horryble greate slaughter/ in which Absalom was slayne with many thousands mo of the commen people."<sup>18</sup>

This interpretation of Second Samuel seems consistent, moreover, with contemporary biblical commentaries. One of the most learned divines of the early seventeenth century, Andrew Willet, wrote an exhaustive commentary on the Second Book of Samuel, and in his notes to "how the sword is threatened not to depart from David's house for ever" (II Sam. XII-10), Willet supplies the following gloss: the "threatening," Willet says, refers to "the domesticall bloodie contentions, that should fall out in David's house," for "it is a rule of God's justice . . . to visite the inequities of the father upon the children only to the third and fourth generation."<sup>19</sup> God had an "overruling hand," Willet notes later, "directing and disposing [the acts] of Absalom." And such acts "must be considered partly as a sinne, partly as a punishment of sinne in which respect God has a hand in it as it served for the Chastisement of David."<sup>20</sup>

Closer to Dryden's own time, Thomas Fuller published a poem on David's Hainous Sinne (1631), dividing his treatment of the story into the familiar pattern of Sinne, Repentence, and Punishment, and emphasizing also the retributive value assigned by earlier writers to the rebellion of Absalom:

More miseries began, as in a chayne,  
 One linke, doth in another linke depend:  
 His lust, with lust, his slaying with slaughter  
 Must punish'd be: proportion'd thereafter.<sup>21</sup>

Others saw in the story a corruptio optime pessima theme. God's "best children," the Rev. Robert Harris explains, "will sometimes venture on noisome meats and hurtfull poisonns, [and] they will feede on the grosser sinnes, [or] they will drinke in every puddle."<sup>22</sup> And "if David," Harris asks, "will lie and commit adultery, and fall to merther innocents, what can God doe lesse for David?" Absalom, he adds, "is sent out of David's bowels to confute him."<sup>23</sup>

I suppose there was an appreciation for what Professor Schilling calls the "myth" of Kingship throughout the seventeenth century, encouraged in several ways by the theory of Divine Right,<sup>24</sup> but Harris' reference to the corruption of the best should remind us, too, that the myth was never far removed from the human vagaries which circumscribed the royal office in the person of the king. To be sure, the King seemed the very center and sun for the nation as an imago mundi; and, in Isaac Barrow's words, as "when the sun shineth brightly, there is a clear day and fair weather over the world; so when a prince is not overclouded with adversity or disastrous occurrences, the public state must be serene, and a pleasant state of things will appear."<sup>25</sup> But it was not always so. No other period, perhaps, was more aware of the tension between the King's Two Bodies, between the King's "private and corporate dignity," between his mortal body, "subject to all the infirmities that come by Nature and Accident," and his persona publica, "utterly void of Infancy and old Age and



other Defects and Imbecilities."<sup>26</sup> While kings occupied a sacred office and, as such, could do no wrong, while their sovereignty was an image of God's sovereignty, their majesty a figure of His majesty, and their empire a similitude of His empire, they were still thought to be cast in vessels of clay. The very contingency of the King's person, moreover, supported the conviction of most orthodox churchmen and statesmen that a strict trust in the Providence of God should be the first rule of nations. Kings, as Isaac Barrow puts it, stand "like high towers, most obnoxious to the winds and tempests of fortune":

They are most exposed to dangers and disasters . . . from whose force or treachery no human providence can sufficiently guard them. . . . They have the natural infirmities of other men, and far beyond other men are subject to external temptations. The malicious spirit (as in the case of Job, David, of Ahab, of Josiah the priest, is expressed) is ever waiting for occasions, ever craving permission of God to seduce and pervert them; success therein being extremely conducive to his villainous designs. The world continually doth assault them with all its advantages, with all its baits of pleasure, with all its inticements to pride and vanity, to oppression and injustice, to sloth, to luxury, to exorbitant self-well and self-conceit, to every sort of vicious practice. Their eminency of state, their affluence of wealth, their uncontrollable power, their continual distraction and encumbrances by varieties of care and business, their multitude of obsequious followers, and scarcity of faithful friends to advise and reprove them, their having no obstacles before them to check their wills, to cross their humours, to curb their lusts and passions, are so many dangerous snares unto them; wherefore they do need plentiful measures of grace, and mighty assistances from God, to preserve them from the worst errors and sins, unto which otherwise it is almost a miracle if they are not plunged.<sup>27</sup>

Barrow's remarks provide us with a remarkable and eloquent example of the compassion and wisdom that could be brought to bear upon the ideal of the kingship in Dryden's time. Furthermore, it is the kind of response one would expect from the tradition we have come to associate with such works as John of Salisbury's Policraticus (1159), A Mirror for Magistrates (1559), Erasmus' The Education of a Christian Prince (1540), and almost countless conduct books on the burdens and blessings of kingship--modulations of praise, as well as blame, moving to and from those great glasses for the triumphs and calamities of kings, the history plays of William Shakespeare. Barrow's reference to David, moreover, should remind us, too, that Israel's first great king was the focus for a complex of responses / and the exemplum for all that was thought to be good and bad, sacred and profane, about kings, courts, and kingdoms.

It is hard to believe Dryden was not aware of these tensions in the minds of Englishmen between the private and public capacities of their king and not aware of the nuances of the David story when he set about writing his poem. It seems hard to believe, too, that his use of Absalom's revolt, irrespective of the emphasis he places on David's sins, would not have readily alerted his audience to its long-standing status as an exemplum of divine retributive justice. It must have been obvious to him, as well, that many of Charles' political problems were connected in a causal way with his propensity to indulge himself and his personal retinue of rakes and chambermaids, a situation Dryden, in fact, does seem to have in mind in His Majesties Declaration Defended when he says: "'Tis

plain, that the King has reduced himself already to live more like a private Gentleman than a Prince."<sup>28</sup> Dryden's ability to respond to this factor in the crisis, limited as it may have been, probably inclined him all the more to use the David story--a story, as we have noticed, with a rather unique capacity to confront the King's weaknesses with the best balance of praise and blame. With this in mind, then, the ways Dryden keeps David's weaknesses before us need to be pointed out. While the King's sins may only modulate and reverberate throughout Dryden's narrative of the plot in a muted way, they are no less important to the meaning of his poem.

[iii]

The all important ground carefully laid down by Dryden for his treatment of the kingship is located at the very beginning of Absalom and Achitophel, where, as critics have noticed, the poet merges the whole libertine aura of the Restoration court into the shadows of a pious past:

In pious times, e'r Priest-craft did begin,  
Before Polygamy was made a sin;  
When man, on many, multiply'd his kind,  
E'r one to one was, cursedly, confined:  
When Nature prompted, and no law deny'd  
Promiscuous use of Concubine and Bride;  
Then, Israel's Monarch, after Heaven's own heart,  
His vigorous warmth did, variously, impart  
To Wives and Slaves: And, wide as his Command,  
Scatter'd his Maker's Image through the Land. (1-10)

Dryden is playing here upon an interesting ambiguity of values and attitudes in the Restoration period whereby, as Professor Dale Underwood has written, a libertine could "sometimes sound curiously like a Christian."<sup>29</sup> The situation involved a complicated set of

relationships and influences, but in part it is the effect of a deep fissure of primitivism running far back into the recesses of western thought, the belief that "man had fallen from his original and primitive state of bliss by following the Ignis fatuus of what the orthodox called 'civilization.'" <sup>30</sup> Given a new emphasis in the seventeenth century by a complex of attitudes contributing to the code called libertinism and by the revival of Epicureanism, this image of man living in a primitive and pristine state became an ideal for the Restoration town gentleman, whose escapades were dramatized in the countless plays which comprise the canon of the Restoration comedy of manners. The libertine, Underwood goes on, apparently believed that if he "were to redeem his fall by following Nature in this [the primitive] frame of reference, he could do so only by freedom from the artificial and corruptive restrictions of custom." <sup>31</sup> The "institution of marriage itself," therefore, "was thus sometimes called into question. The libertine's frequent assertions that God made women 'free' and that the introduction of marriage constituted a fall of man," moreover, "usually involved an ironic awareness of some Christian authority," as well as an awareness of the highly debatable place of marriage in the history of Christian dogma. <sup>32</sup> The libertine, then, could easily point to St. Augustine's writings, where God is thought to have granted the patriarchs many wives to insure the growth and perpetuation of his chosen people. The "multiple marriages of that time," Augustine says, "symbolically signified the future multitude subject to God in all the people of the earth." <sup>33</sup> The beginning of Dryden's Absalom

and Achitophel, as Professor Martin Price has suggested, is tied into this little knot of values and attitudes. "The first six lines call up the times of the patriarchs when Abraham could receive God in his presence, when the direct knowledge of God was not filtered through the self-interest and rituals of a clergy. They also call up the image of nature as the scene of the complete fulfillment of man's whole nature, a golden age without guilt. To fall from such a world was indeed to be cursedly confined, both in the traditional religious sense--in our fallen world marriage is a sacramental institution administered by priest-craft--and in the 'smart' naturalistic sense of losing the joys of polygamy."<sup>34</sup>

In these several ways, then, Dryden does seem to beg the question of custom and law, and to look away from the King's personal debilities. But as Price has noted, a "libertine is likely to make a feeble king," and it is important, I think, not to miss the way certain operative words in the passage press forward the symptoms of disorder and indiscretion menacing England's kingship. While David's gust and warmth suggest a largeness of heart that Dryden wishes to contrast with the furtiveness of Achitophel and the other conspirators, he recognizes, too, the dissipation that accompanies the exercise of these qualities. The yoking of "pious" and "polygamy" modulates into a "promiscuous use," suggesting an indiscriminate and disordered state of affairs, while the words "multiply," "wide," and "various," express a diffusiveness and diminution of strength inherent in the very exercise of David's warm and vigorous heart. And while David may be Godlike, he is engaged in scattering this Godlike image over the land. The word "scatter'd" accentuates the

idea of indiscretion and negligence already hinted at by the phrase "promiscuous use," and, again, qualifies David's generosity of spirit. The irony and ambiguity of the line is sustained by the numerous pejorative uses of the word "scattering" in the Old Testament to describe the dispersion and weakening of the Jewish people. Such scattering also links the dubious value of David's vigor with the conventional image of the state as garden. As Professor Anne Davidson Ferry has put it, "in the political context of 'wide as his Command,' the word 'Scatter'd' hints at a kind of wilful carelessness or waste, a disorder in the planting which promises no full harvest."<sup>35</sup> In contrast to the traditional pastoral treatments of the relationship between the vigor of a King and the vigor of his kingdom, then, the soil of David's garden is vitiated, a sterility pervades his court, and no true succession shall grow from his reckless tillage:

Michal, of Royal blood, the Crown did wear,  
A Soyl ungratefull to the Tiller's care:  
Not so the rest; for several Mothers bore  
To Godlike David, several Sons before.  
But since like slaves his bed they did ascend,  
No True Succession could their seed attend. (11-16)

The dangers implicit in David's easy and undisturbed reign become clearer in Dryden's description of Absalom. On the surface, Absalom seems the epitome of nobility and heroic virtue, but there is something tenuous and conditional about his character: "In peace the thoughts of War he could remove,/ And seem'd as he were only born for love" (25-26). The phrase "only born for love" rebounds in a punning way back to the preceding lines ("Whether, inspir'd by some diviner Lust,/ His Father got him with a greater Gust"),<sup>36</sup> giving Absalom's origins the very kind of voluptuous shading earlier poets

had associated with David's gallant but unfortunate affairs, and suggesting, perhaps, that in the face of great political and religious significance attached to the birth of a prince, Abaslom, in fact, was only "born for love," and for the lust of David. Absalom's manner also seems ambigious:

What e'r he did was done with so much ease,  
In him alone, 'twas Natural to please.  
His motions all accompanied with grace;  
And Paradise was open'd in his face. (27-30)

The operative terms in the passage--"ease," "Natural," "Paradise," and "grace"--recall the status of Adam, "taught to live/ the easiest way," (PL, VIII-183),<sup>37</sup> and at the same time recall pejoratively the use that libertines and neo-Epicureans in the Restoration made of the word "ease"<sup>38</sup> in their ecomiums to man's original and, in their view, more perfect state. Thomas Creech describes the attitude as follows: "nothing is happy but what is supinely idol and at Ease." Even their Gods, he says, are "easie and quiet," and "therefore unconcerned with the affairs of the world, for being full of themselves why should they look on others, or trouble their minds with considerations of less perfection."<sup>39</sup> In Paradise Regained Christ bluntly rejects Satan's apology for the "Sect of Epicureans"--describing them contemptuously as those who would join virtue with "rich long life;/ In corporal pleasure . . . and careless ease" (PR IV, 298-299). Dryden, perhaps with these connotations of the word in mind, calls our attention to the inherent dangers of Absalom's "easy" nature in his preface to the poem: the "most excellent Natures," he says, "are always the most easy; and, in being such are the soonest perverted

by ill counsels" (39-40). These hints at Absalom's weaknesses are quickly confirmed in the next lines by the reference to "those faults his Father could not, or would not see" (36), and in the narrator's acknowledgment that Absalom's vigor already has erupted into murder:

What faults he had (for who from faults is free?)  
His Father could not, or would not see.  
Some warm excesses, which the Law forbore,  
Were construed Youth that purged by boiling o'r:  
And Amnon's Murther, by a specious Name,  
Was call'd a Just Revenge for injur'd Fame.  
Thus Prais'd, and Lov'd, the Novle Youth remain'd,  
While David, undisturb'd, in Sion reign'd. (35-42)

The yoking of Absalom's propensity to violence and passion with David's propensity to indolence and indulgence is a decisive moment in the poem, suggesting for the first time that David's promiscuity has planted the seeds of calamity within his house, that his wantonness may indeed become a menace to the very institution of the kingship, and that his own sins are beginning to visit him in the savagings of his son. It is here, too, that Dryden brings us quite close to an image of the King as counterpart of a kind of jolly Epicurean god, a god, as he describes him in The Medall,

That lets the World and Humane Kind alone:  
A Jolly God that passes hours too well  
To promise Heaven or threaten us with Hell  
That unconcerned can at Rebellion sit  
And Wink at Crimes he did himself commit. (278-282)

While in some ways, then, Dryden's opening lines in Absalom and Achitophel do recall the first garden, the kingdom of grace and fecundity, and the first "seed" of virtue implanted in the soil of man, while in some ways Dryden does make broad concessions to Charles II, the reader should, I think, recognize by the context Dryden supplies



for these tokens of a blessed past, the shadings of disorder which render the whole scene satirically reflexive, which foreshadow trouble, and insinuate the same tremors of impending ruin that modulate through Milton's descriptions of paradise. The "seed" is scattered, the soil is "ungrateful to the tiller's care," and the virtue planted in a "noble" youth threatens to become the amoral virtue espoused in the writings of Machiavelli and Hobbes. In sum, the entire proem to Dryden's poem is a remarkable and finely wrought emblem of the dilemma of a king in the kingdom of this world, a kingdom, Dryden reminds us, that would be, but can never be "sincerely blest" (43).

Dryden's purpose in all this becomes fully disclosed in the last line of the section: "Heaven punishes the bad, and proves the best" (44). The word "prove" carries the important biblical connotation "to try and examine"; or, as in the Book of Deuteronomy (VIII-2) "to try by some affliction that men may know their own heart." The punishment of Achitophel and his party of malcontents develops overtly in the poem through an accumulation of images surrounding them in a kind of hell of their own making. "Feinds," as Dryden describes them, "harden'd in Impenitence" (145), and their final demise is insisted on at the end of the poem. The punishment and "proving" of David, however, is expressed in the very disloyalty of Absalom and in more subtle ways by a series of turns upon the very terms we have found Dryden using to describe David's character, a generous, loving, and easy warmth that at times comes dangerously close to indolence, wantonness, and the ruin of kingdoms.

iv

In Absalom and Achitophel Dryden dramatizes the justice of things by highlighting the various and ironic collusions between the King's "easy" sway and the very elements menacing him. Throughout the account of the conspiracy, in other words, the King's own habits come to haunt and hound him, and his own excesses revisit him in the rebellion of his people. The English nation, Dryden and Tate noted guardedly in The Second Part of Absalom and Achitophel has become sick with plenty:

Sway'd by a Monarch whose serene Command,  
Seems half the Blessing of our promis'd Land,  
Whose onely Grievance is excess of Ease,  
Freedome our Pain, and Plenty our Disease! (SAA, 29-31)

In his own poem, as well, Dryden locates the source of rebellion in the very luxury of the Jews (i. e., the English): a "pamper'd people whom, debauch'd with ease,/ No King could govern, nor no God could please" (47-48); and he goes on to suggest the ways the King, by his example, and the kingdom, by its active ingratitude, have turned "the 'grace of God into wantonness.'" <sup>40</sup> Repeatedly, in the scenes of rebellion, the word ease, associated as we have seen with Epicureanism and libertinism, reverberates and rebounds in an obliquely satiric way back to this King who should govern, but who would rather remain "in Sion"--idle and "undisturb'd" (42).

The conditions for Achitophel's successful seduction of the populace, Dryden tells us, include the "easie" atmosphere of the times, when "publick Zeal" can "cancel private Crimes" (180-181), and as

the poem develops rebellion is increasingly associated with the propensity of the Jews, living at ease and disinclined to think, to take the path of least resistance. Achitophel, therefore, plies the people with weak arguments, but arguments he knows full well are "strong with People easie to Rebell" (215), and when Absalom makes his progress through the kingdom, he works the crowds "and with familiar ease repeats their Names . . . ,/ And glides unfelt into their secret hearts":

Then with a kind compassionating look,  
And sighs, bespeaking pity ere he spoak,  
Few words he said; but easy those and fit:  
More slow than Hybla drops, and far more sweet. (694-697)

Dryden seems to satirize here one of the more disturbing abuses the orthodox associated with the revival of Epicureanism and the progress of Hobbism in England; that is, the increasing tendency of the nobility to espouse in the name of urbanity and an "easie" manner a kind of nominalism.<sup>41</sup> "It gives great disturbance to good men," William Sherlock noted at the time, to see "the general corruption of Manners that is in the world; that Men call evil good and good evil, darkness light and light darkness, bitter sweet and sweet bitter," and with "an easy obliging friendly conversation . . . justify their vices as only the Effects and Instances of good Humour and Sociableness, and of a complying Temper to make their Conversation easie."<sup>42</sup>

In other ways as well as the King's idleness and dissipated power encourage the very idolatry--treason in the last degree--that threatens the order of his kingdom and the security of his office; and Dryden exposes this idolatrous temper of the people quite early in the poem:

(Gods they had tri'd of every shape and size  
 That God-smiths could produce, or Priests devise:  
 These Adam-wits, too fortunately free,  
 Began to dream they wanted libertie;  
 And when no rule, no president was found  
 Of men, by Laws less circumscrib'd and bound,  
 They led their wild desires to Woods and Caves,  
 And thought that all but Savages were Slaves.  
 They who when Saul was dead, without a blow,  
 Made foolish Ishbosheth the Crown forgo;  
 Who banisht David did from Hebron bring,  
 And, with a Generall Shout, proclaim'd him King:  
 Those very Jewes, who, at their very best,  
 Their Humour more than Loyalty exprest,  
 Now, wondred why, so long, they had obey'd  
 An Idoll Monarch which their hands had made:  
 Thought they might ruine him they could create;  
 Or melt him to that Golden Calf, a State. (49-66)

The passage contains several topical and biblical references. Saul and Ishbosheth, two kings of dubious merit who preceded David's reign, are associated with the interregnum, while the ingratitude of the English after the restoration of Charles II exemplifies the same mood of the discontented Israelites described in Acts VIII-40: "Saying unto Aaron, Make us gods to go before us: And they made a Calf in those days, / And offered sacrifice unto the idol and rejoiced in the work of their own hands." Dryden glances also in these lines at the decay and idolatry of the kingdom described by the prophet Hosea:

They have set up Kings, but not by  
 me: they have made princes, and I knew it  
 not: of their silver and their gold have  
 they made them idols, that they may be  
 cut off. (Hosea, VIII-4)

. . . . .

And now they sin more and more, And  
 have made them molten images of their  
 silver, and idols according to their own  
 understanding, all of it the work of  
 craftsmen: they say of them, Let the men  
 that sacrifice kiss the calves. (Hosea, XIII-2)

By specifying a book of the Old Testament that is especially concerned with a period of uncommon political decadence and moral corruption in the history of Israel, these allusions provide a focus at the very outset of the poem for the peculiarly hedonistic forms of idolatry pervading David's kingdom, the same tendencies depicted in the Book of Hosea, in other words, to ritualize sensuality through gluttony and excessive sexuality. At the same time, Dryden's emphasis on the incessant pandering to the senses in the world of his poem draws the reader's attention, I think, to that "sensationalistic bent of Epicurean epistemology" which provided the libertine in the Restoration with a frame of reference for his code of pleasure.<sup>43</sup>

As Professor Underwood has noted, "among other favorite citations from Epicurus' writings for both the libertine and his attackers" was the precept that "the beginning and root of all good is the pleasure of the stomach; even wisdom and culture must be referred to this."<sup>44</sup> Dryden, it seems to me, weaves in a satiric way the implications of this proposition throughout the scenes of rebellion in his poem, dramatizing the propensity of the Jews to pervert the values of religion and government into the pleasures of feeding, and to effect as it were a travesty on the traditional and essentially sacramental belief in the "spiritual food" man needs for his health and growth as a creature of God. At the outset, for example, he notes the inclination of the people to espouse "his cause by whom they eat and drink." And while the English may hate the Jebusites (i. e., the Catholics), whose "Gods were recommended by their Tast" (118), and while they may condemn the doctrine of transubstantiation as an

idolatrous practice,<sup>45</sup> they are impeached with the same sin in their imprudent and gluttonous reaction to rumors of a Popish Plot:

From hence began that Plot, the Nation's Curse,  
Bad in it self, but represented worse,  
Rais'd in extremes, and in extremes decry'd;  
With Oaths affirm'd, with dying Vows deny'd.  
Not weigh'd, or winnow'd by the Multitude;  
But swallow'd in the Mass, unchew'd and Crude.  
Some Truth there was, but dash'd and brew'd with Lyes;  
To please the Fools, and puzzle all the Wise. (108-115)

The lines suggest a perversion of wisdom, a form of thoughtless indulgence, that is just as serious as the perversions Anglicans in Dryden's time associated with Popery, and Dryden presses this meaning to the reader by turning the inordinate devouring of the plot into a kind of parody of the Roman Mass.

Elsewhere in the poem overfeeding and underfeeding become satirically associated with the rebellious elements within the kingdom. Achitophel pleads with Absalom not to "starve" the people of his reign, and to seize the "fruit" of fortune before it rots upon the tree, while Absalom is said to gradually become "drunk" with glory and "debauched" with praise. The people, Dryden tells us, "feed" upon his person, while Absalom, in turn, feeds them rhetorical drops of "Hybla." The leading conspirators--Buckingham, Oates, William, Lord Howard of Escrick--are all characterized by acts of excessive eating and drinking or by abuses of the eucharistic value of "food." This literal feeding of rebellion in the poem reaches a kind of satiric apex in Dryden's description of Shemei's kitchen:

Chast were his Cellars, and his Shrieval Board  
The Grossness of a City Feast abhor'd;  
His Cooks, with long disuse, their Trade forgot;  
Cool was his Kitchen, tho his Brains were hot.

Such frugal Vertue Malice may accuse,  
But sure 'twas necessary to the Jews:  
For Towns once burnt, such Magistrates require  
As dare not tempt Gods Providence by fire.  
With Spiritual food he fed his Servants well,  
But free from flesh, that made the Jews Rebel: (618-627)

As Professor Maynard Mack has noted, the passage plays upon the "Lavish hospitality . . . expected of the London sheriffs, wryly suggesting that Bethel's (i. e., Shemei's) stinginess to his servants is a Puritan reinterpretation of the sacrament of the Eucharist, by . . . which we are fed with 'spiritual food.'"<sup>46</sup> But Dryden has heightened the irony of the passage, too, it seems to me, by alluding to a similar and equally treacherous incident in the Book of Hosea where the conspirators are said to be raging like burning ovens while the cooks sleep in the kitchens:

For they have made ready their heart  
like an oven, while they lie in wait: their  
baker sleepeth all the night; in the morn-  
ing it burneth as a flaming fire.

They are all hot as an oven, and have  
devoured their judges; all their Kings  
are fallen; there is none among them that  
calleth unto me. (Hosea, VII-6-7)

The allusion to Hosea has the effect of fully exposing the hypocrisy of Shemei's abstinence and frugality as a cover for the hot rebellion that burns within his very person. Such "starving" of the body politic becomes as serious an abuse of government as the rapacious activities of Absalom and Achitophel. Ironically, under the pretense of religious purity, he, too, would "devour" an entire kingdom.

The several allusions to the Book of Hosea we have noticed operating in the poem serve in still another significant way by bringing into play the biblical prophet's use of a marriage metaphor to

describe the relationship between a king and his kingdom, and by glancing at Hosea's account of a "land" that "committed great whoredom" in "departing from the Lord." Fragments of this metaphor keep bobbing to the surface in Absalom and Achitophel and keep drawing into focus a series of turns on David's love and lust for his concubines, as well as his love for Absalom and the people. Ironically, political disorders in the world of Dryden's poem are expressed in terms of sexual disorders, and at the very outset we are told that the Devil has means to turn the kingdom, as the King's spouse, into a bawd for his own gain:

The careful Devil is still at hand with means  
And providently pimps for ill desires. (80-81)

The phrase "providently pimps" may be a clue to the overriding irony of Dryden's poem, that as surely as the satanic Achitophel plots to turn the kingdom into a whoredom, he just as surely will render a service unto God and providentially reaffirm the marriage between the King and the kingdom.<sup>47</sup> For the present, however, the line prepares us for Achitophel's appeals to Absalom, couched in Ovidian and libertine terms, to try his power over the kingdom and the King:

If so, by Force he wishes to be gain'd,  
Like womens Leachery, to seem Constrain'd;  
Doubt not, but when he most affects the Frown,  
Commit a pleasing Rape upon the Crown.  
Secure his Person to secure your Cause;  
They who possess the Prince, possess the Laws. (471-476)

Achitophel appropriates for political purposes the language and argument of the libertine that a woman's charms ought to be put to the use for which nature intended them, and the King is depicted as one who may be tempted to frustrate nature by spurning the seductive



appeals of Absalom. By introducing an argument of this kind in the mouth of Achitophel, Dryden expresses obliquely the ways the King's own behavior has made the kingship extremely vulnerable and made the succession a matter of uncertainty.

Elsewhere in the poem David's wanton tillage receives an ironic comment through the metaphor of the state as a garden, where neglect has enabled the weeds of rebellion to flourish, where praise has become "barren," and where men have become more and more disposed to discard the King on "principles of pure good husbandry." David's abundant planting and negligent nurturing, in short, have in some ways precipitated the spread and growth of the cockle that threatens to choke the normal processes of growth and harvest. These horticultural images, combined with the numerous references to sexual abuse, provide a kind of submerged comment on David's personal example as a king. The Jebusites "rake" the "Stews" for their converts, while Achitophel's own furtive sexuality breeds the "shapeless lump" of a son Dryden compares to "Anarchy." The word "love" itself modulates through the various scenes of conspiracy, through Achitophel's efforts to "estrangle" the "alter'd Hearts" of "all sorts of men," through the references to a people "seduced" into rebellion, while some of the leading conspirators are associated with forms of sexual excess and perversion: the famous rake, the Duke of Buckingham, "all for Women, Painting, Rhiming, Drinking" (551), "cold Caleb" (574), thought to have been Lord Grey, who according to rumor had consented to an affair between his wife and the Duke of Monmouth (Absalom), and "well hung Balaam" (574), the infamous debauchee, Theophilus Hastings.<sup>48</sup> In sum,

the "wild desires" of the people, the pandering of politicians, and the disloyalty of a son, disposed to "gain the public's love," all seem to conspire with the promiscuous mood of the Restoration court and all seem bent on turning the kingdom into a whoredom for the selfish interests of a few.

By submerging the rebellion in the very kinds of excesses associated with the King at the beginning of the poem, Dryden creates a kind of interpenetration between David's promiscuity and the disorders in David's kingdom. To be sure, there is a crucial difference between the good natured vigor of David and the rapacious zeal of the people. But Dryden's conflation of the two suggests, also, the ways "the naturalistic zest of the opening lines, as Professor Price has put it, so easily gives way to a "salacious cunning" in the person of an Achitophel, the way the "generous and expansive freedom" of David so easily "contracts into the cheap calculations" of an Absalom, and how quickly a mood of "robust primitivism" deteriorates into something "darker and more cruel" and bestial in the people.<sup>49</sup> Without asserting it, Dryden seems in touch throughout the poem with the belief of many orthodox minds in the Restoration that there is a kind of moral connection between a king and his kingdom. In a legal sense, of course, the King could do no wrong, but as the focus of values for an entire nation, as the very center of its strengths and weaknesses, as the source of its grace and disgrace, he could do everything wrong. And his personal conduct was still thought to matter. "Governments," Robert South preached at the time of the troubles over Popery and exclusion, "most Naturally follow the Personal Abilities of

the Governours"; they ebb and flow "according to the rising or falling of [their] Spirit[s]. . . . For still it is the Person that makes the Place considerable and not the Place Him."<sup>50</sup> Isaac Barrow, perhaps, puts it more precisely: "the prosperity of a prince," he says, "is inseparable from the prosperity of his people; they are ever partaking of his fortunes, and thriving or suffering with him." There is, he goes on, "a kind of moral connection, or communication of merit and guilt, between prince and people; so that each of them is rewarded for the virtues, each is punished for the vices of the other."<sup>51</sup>

Dryden, it seems to me, makes numerous gestures to this communication of merit and guilt between David and his kingdom. Each in a way is punished for the vices of the other, and although the King's excesses become increasingly absorbed and easily forgotten in the gross activities of the opposition party, the poem also dramatizes a purging of David's character, a testing of his metal, a redemption of his power by trial. For it is only after David has been brought to confront the very uncreating excesses of his kingdom, and the disloyalty of his son, that he abandons the role of libertine to take up the scepter of command.

## NOTES

1. Lancelot Andrewes' sermons on the Gunpowder Treason in Ninety-Six Sermons (Oxford, 1841), IV, 203-405, are relevant here.
2. I take the phrase from Harold Fisch, Jerusalem and Albion: The Hebraic Factor in Seventeenth-Century Literature (New York, 1964).
3. Symon Patrick, Angliae Speculum: A glass that flatters not; . . . In a parallel between the kingdom of Israel and England. Wherein the whole nation is desired to behold our sin, and our danger (London, 1678), p. 2.
4. Arthur Hoffman, John Dryden's Imagery (Gainesville, Fla., 1962), p. 73.
5. The Poems of John Dryden, ed. by James Kinsley (Oxford, 1958), IV, 1878. All subsequent references to Dryden's poetry are according to this edition.
6. The Works of Nathaniel Lee, ed. by Thomas B. Stroup and Arthur L. Cooke (New Brunswick, N. J., 1955), II, 558, lines 48-51.
7. Bernard N. Schilling, Dryden and the Conservative Myth: A Reading of Absalom and Achitophel (New Haven, 1961), p. 268.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 288.
10. James E. Wellington, "Conflicting Concepts of Man in Dryden's Absalom and Achitophel," Satire Newsletter, IV (1966), 5, believes if Dryden had attacked "Monmouth personally," or if he had discussed "Charles' private morality with any air of ridicule or reproach," he "would doubtless have plunged" himself "into an abyss of trouble." The implication of the poem's opening lines, Wellington goes on, is "that no personal stigma can be attached either to Absalom's bastardy or his father's adultery."
11. Schilling, p. 148.
12. I assume throughout this chapter that traditional readings of Second Samuel have an immediate bearing on the meaning of Dryden's poem, and I am not convinced by John M. Wallace's arguments in "Dryden and History: A Problem in Allegorical Reading," ELH, XXXVI

(1969), 280, n. 25., that Dryden's use of the David "story is essentially secular, and that its Biblical origin does not justify typological readings."

13. In Renaissance Drama, ed. by S. Schoenbaum (Evanston, 1965), VIII, 30.
14. Ibid., p. 9.
15. Ibid., p. 11.
16. Ibid., p. 8.
17. Ibid., pp. 19-20.
18. Heinrich Bullinger, The Christian State of Matrimonye, trans. by Myles Coverdale (London, 1541), fol. 3. Cited from Ewbank, p. 20.
19. Andrew Willet, An Harmonie upon the Second Booke of Samuel, . . . (Cambridge, 1614), p. 67.
20. Ibid., p. 79.
21. Thomas Fuller, David's Hainous Sinne (London, 1631), pt. iii, st. 10.
22. Robert Harris, Absalom's Funerall: Preached at Bamburie. . . (London, 1611), pp. 4-5.
23. Ibid. For a useful list of plays and poems on David see John McLaren McBryde, Jr., "A Study of Cowly's Davideis," JEGP, II (1898), 454-527.
24. For the standard account of Divine Right theory see John Neville Figgis, The Divine Right of Kings (London, 1896), reprinted, 1965, Harper & Brothers: Torchbook Series.
25. Isaac Barrow, The Theological Works, ed. by Alexander Napier (Cambridge, 1859), I, 410.
26. Ernst H. Kantorowicz, The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology (Princeton, 1957), p. 436. The efforts of the orthodox to articulate an overview of the King's private and corporate status may have been prompted by the tendency of the opposition party to separate the King's Two Bodies, to make the King, in Dryden's words, a mere token "for an Innkeeper to set upon a Sign-Post to draw custom," a King who in his political capacity "ought not to marry, love, hate, make war, or peace," but "as a King" simply be "agreeable to the People." See John Dryden, His Majesties Declaration Defended, Augustan Reprint Society Publication (Los Angeles, 1950), No. 23, p. 16.

27. Barrow, I, 425.
28. Dryden, His Majesties Declaration, p. 16.
29. Dale Underwood, Etherege and the Seventeenth-Century Comedy of Manners (New Haven, 1957), p. 16.
30. Ibid., pp. 34-35.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. St. Augustine, The Good of Marriage, trans. by Charles T. Wilcox, in The Fathers of the Church, ed. by J. Deferrari (New York, 1955), XXVII, 36.
34. Martin Price, To the Palace of Wisdom (New York, 1964), p. 53.
35. Ann Davidson Ferry, Milton and the Miltonic Dryden (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), p. 83.
36. Christopher Ricks makes the point in his "Dryden's Absalom," Essays in Criticism, XI (1961), 273.
37. John Milton, Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. by Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1957), p. 367. All subsequent references to Milton's works are according to this text.
38. See Ricks, p. 274, who notes the poet's ambiguous use of the word "ease" but fails to test its Epicurean connections. For the background of neo-Epicurean thought in the seventeenth century see Thomas F. Mayo, Epicurus in England (College Station, Texas, 1934), Wolfgang Bernard Fleischmann, Lucretius and English Literature (Paris, 1963), and the introduction by Marjorie Hope Nicolson to Thomas Shadwell's The Virtuoso, ed. by Marjorie Hope Nicolson and David Stuart Rodes, for the Regents Restoration Drama Series (Lincoln, Nebr., 1966), pp. xv-xxvi.
39. Titus Lucretius Carus, His Six Books of Epicurean Philosophy, done into English verse, with notes, by Thomas Creech (Oxford, 1683), pp. 2-4, of The Notes.
40. John Tillotson, Sermons on Several Subjects and Occasions (London, 1748), VIII, 234.
41. Robert South, in Forty-Eight Sermons (London, 1715), II, 324, attributes the position "that Good and Evil, Honest and Dishonest" are merely conventional signs of valuation to "Epicurus, as it is represented by Gassaendus; who understood his notions too well, to misrepresent them. And lately it is the opinion of one amongst ourselves, a lesser Philosopher, though the greater Heathan of the two, the Infamous Author of the Leviathan."

42. William Sherlock, Sermons Preach'd upon Several Occasions (London, 1702), pp. 495-500.

43. Underwood, p. 16. As Underwood also notes (p. 15), the term "Epicurean" has been used with some "sufferance" in discussions of seventeenth-century thought. Certainly, the ignorance of Epicurus in the Restoration was profound. Yet the term Epicurean "is only partly a misnomer. It marks primarily a distinction between popular and learned thought. In the Restoration itself, 'libertine' and 'Epicurean' were virtually interchangeable terms for the majority of writers who dealt with them."

44. Ibid.

45. Anglicans considered the doctrine of transubstantiation an idolatrous tendency to misplace the "spiritual efficacy" of a sacrament by confusing accidents with substance. In a sermon attacking the doctrine, Bishop Tillotson argues that the "spiritual efficacy of the sacrament doth not depend upon the nature of the thing received, supposing we receive what our lord appointed, and receive it with a right preparation and disposition of mind, but [it does depend] upon the supernatural blessings that go along with it and make it effectual." When Christ, Tillotson adds, "call'd the symbols or elements of the sacrament, viz. bread and wine, his body and blood, he made no change in the nature of the things, only added grace to nature, that is by divine grace and blessing he raised them to a spiritual and supernatural virtue and efficacy." The Catholic rite, therefore, represented to the Anglicans a presumption to "make God"--an action designed, it was thought, to elevate the clergy at the expense of the Deity. See Tillotson, II, 178.

46. Maynard Mack, ed., The Augustans (second edition; Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1962), p. 59, n. 626.

47. cf. Hosea, XIV-1-4.

48. The identification of Caleb as Lord Grey is based on the Key of 1716 and has been noted by George R. Noyes, ed., The Poetical Works of John Dryden (Cambridge, Mass., 1909), revised, 1950, p. 1056, n. 117, though Noyes also has pointed out that there is some disagreement on the matter and Caleb may refer to Arthur Capel, the Earl of Essex.

49. I take my phrasing here from the analysis by Price, p. 60, though he chooses not to emphasize the irony of the relationship between David's vigor and the disorders in his kingdom.

50. South, II, 467-468.

51. Barrow, I, 412.

### III

#### THE KING'S WORD

It is a common proverb: verbum  
regis stet oportet, a king's  
word must stand.

Bishop John Fisher (1509)

[i]

Samuel Johnson apparently first questioned the artistic merit of David's speech from the throne at the end of Dryden's Absalom and Achitophel. In the body of the poem, Johnson observes, "the chiefs on either part are set forth to view; but, when expectation is at the height, the king makes a speech, and 'Henceforth a Series of new time began!'" And Johnson goes on: "Who can forbear to think of an enchanted castle, with a wide moat and lofty embattlements, walls of marble and gates of brass, which vanishes at once into air when the destined knight blows his horn before it."<sup>1</sup> Over the years critics have been slow to answer fully Johnson's famous censure of the conclusion to Dryden's poem; in fact, opinion on the artistic efficacy of the King's speech has been decidedly mixed.<sup>2</sup> Professor Anne Davidson Ferry's recent, detailed, and in some ways provocative study of Absalom and Achitophel, for example, tacitly endorses Johnson's reservations about the poem's conclusion and explicitly questions the formal and substantive worth of David's speech. "The speech itself,"



Professor Ferry argues, "does not represent a purified language with power to restore order to the chaos of human history,"<sup>3</sup> and while Dryden "apparently intends that we should believe in the redemptive power of David's speech, we are not convinced by it. . . . For the monarch's claims seem finally to depend, not on the creative efficacy of eloquence restored, but on the arbitrary use of moral terminology to describe political aims, the cynical manipulation of verbal 'arts' associated throughout the satire with the lawlessness of Achitophel's party."<sup>4</sup> Professor Ferry's conclusions are well documented and they are based, in part, on a close and concise reading of the Miltonic echoes in Absalom and Achitophel; but, over and above these qualities, her conclusions so demean the worth of Dryden's poem and the worth of his art that further appraisal of the context and content of David's speech seems in order.

Long before Johnson described the demerits of Dryden's conclusion to Absalom and Achitophel, David's speech had been discussed and appraised as a poetic translation of the speech Charles II had delivered at the beginning of his Oxford parliament in March, 1681. According to Spence, Pope had been told by a Jesuit acquaintance that "King Charles obliged Dryden to put his Oxford speech into verse, and to insert it towards the close of Absalom and Achitophel."<sup>5</sup> Professor Godfrey Davies, on the other hand, believes Pope was misinformed, and David's speech most resembles a declaration issued by the King on April 8th, 1681.<sup>6</sup> Dryden may have had both the speech and declaration at hand, but they resemble David's speech only in matters common to most apologies written for the government during the exclusion crisis.<sup>7</sup>

The crown's status, moreover, had changed between the spring of 1681 when Charles made his views public, and the summer and autumn months when Dryden probably was writing his poem. This change followed upon a successful wave of propaganda, including Dryden's own His Majesties Declaration Defended, and the arrest of Shaftesbury in July.

Prior to July, Professor Davies has pointed out, the apologists for the crown had written with three aims in mind: to maintain the sacramental value of the kingship against proposals which would consign it to a bastard, to palliate fears of an inquisition after the coronation of the Catholic Duke of York, and to disabuse the public of its suspicion that Charles II's frequent prorogations of parliament would result in arbitrary rule.<sup>8</sup> The court and its apologists were convinced that once the public could be brought to realize the good intentions of their King, Shaftesbury would lose the popular support he needed to effect passage of an Exclusion Bill. As Dryden argues in His Majesties Declaration Defended, "once the goodness and equity of the Prince comes to be truly understood by the People, the Authority of the Faction is extinguished; and the well meaning crowd who are misled, will no longer gape after the specious names of Religion and Liberty; much like the folly of the Jews, expecting a Messiah still to come, whose History has been written sixteen hundred years ago."<sup>9</sup> For a time this policy was successful. By midsummer the King seemed to have wide support, and he accordingly ordered Shaftesbury's arrest.

Government propaganda now focused on Shaftesbury's person and charges he had plotted against the King. As Shaftesbury's most recent

biographer has emphasized, "Dryden's Absalom and Achitophel, which appeared in November, was by no means the first or most violent of the poems which tried to pour ridicule upon" the opposition leader.<sup>10</sup> Vicious and ill contrived, these attacks by no means helped the King's cause. Rather, they provided a new rallying point for Shaftesbury's party, and by August, 1681, when Dryden may have been at work on his poem, the security of the kingship was again in peril. The crown's opponents were further encouraged in the months leading up to Shaftesbury's trial by the claims of a Captain Henry Wilkinson that the government had tried to bribe him. While awaiting trial in a debtors' prison, Wilkinson apparently had been offered a reward by two representatives of the crown if he could reveal information to substantiate the charges against Shaftesbury.<sup>11</sup> He refused and published his story shortly before the trial.

Shaftesbury's supporters now cried up the injustice of the King's actions. Charges that Charles II would bring a new despotism to England were argued effectively in a clever pamphlet by Robert Ferguson,<sup>12</sup> who wished to justify an Ignoramus verdict from the jury in the upcoming trial. To this end, Ferguson suggests throughout his No Protestant-Plot . . . that the King has been deprived of his power to secure justice by his Popish friends at court. The author lays particular stress on three facets of the crown's proceedings against Shaftesbury. The Earl, according to Ferguson, had never been allowed to face his accusers.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, he finds the credibility of the crown's witnesses against Shaftesbury so doubtful that he believes no jury would return a guilty verdict.<sup>14</sup> The charge

of a Shaftesburian plot against the government, finally, is explained as a specious story brought to the King's attention by certain Papists who have succeeded in gaining a guardianship over the King's prerogatives.<sup>15</sup> Such abuses of justice, Ferguson warns, may prove fatal to the government and to the King, for "hardly ever [has] any considerable Peer, of whose innocence the minds of the people were universally possest, [been] destroyed and overthrown, but it [has been] attended with some ill effect or other towards the government or the Ministers that sat at the Helm, and advised it."<sup>16</sup>

Absalom and Achitophel was published sometime between the appearance of Ferguson's inflammatory pamphlet, on October 13th, and November 17th, when Luttrell affixed his name to a copy of Dryden's poem and described it as a "vindication of the King."<sup>17</sup> It is difficult to believe Dryden had not read Ferguson's work. The pamphlet created considerable stir; so much, that the King considered moving Shaftesbury's trial from London to Oxford.<sup>18</sup> It would not have been unusual, moreover, for Dryden to address a poem to a particular work or specific set of charges. "In all his poems which deal with issues of public interest," Professor Phillip Harth has reminded us, "Dryden habitually writes as an 'occasional' poet in the best sense of the term. He seizes upon some occasion which has aroused excitement or controversy and makes it the subject of a poem which he publishes before the public's interest has subsided."<sup>19</sup> Whether or not Dryden had Ferguson's pamphlet in mind when he wrote Absalom and Achitophel is not crucial to my reading of David's speech from the throne, but I do believe Ferguson's charges provide a context and explanation for

three principal facets of Dryden's argument in the body of his poem: the existence of a true Protestant plot hatched by Shaftesbury (207-213); Shaftesbury's collusion with Oates and other false witnesses (922); the indispensibility and justice of the King's proceedings against Shaftesbury (913-932).

Above all, Ferguson's work reflects the kind of slander aimed at royal justice in the months leading up to Shaftesbury's trial, and the stir such slander created may have influenced Dryden's decision to conclude his poem with the King's speech from the throne. As a carefully phrased prophecy of judgment, reminiscent of the imprecatory psalms of David, the speech dramatizes the necessities of justice on the eve of Shaftesbury's trial. As a reluctant oracle of justice who enters the action only after a long catalogue of the affronts to the dignity of his office, and only after the vices of his enemies have proven sufficiently his virtues, the King speaks in words which properly affirm the moral integrity of the kingship against charges of malfeasance by Shaftesbury's party. Read simply in the context of contemporary politics, then, the speech may be appreciated as the appropriate response and as a token of Dryden's rhetorical genius and knowledge of the crisis.

I am persuaded, however, that Dryden's rendering of David's speech entails another dimension of meaning and carries the political issues of the poem to a higher plane of human experience. I am persuaded that his depiction of the King as a reluctant oracle of justice most properly vindicates God's mercy, patience, and long-suffering toward the sins of men. I am persuaded, finally, that David's

word and God's logos become fully reciprocal at the end of the poem, and this gestus oratorius reaffirms both the sacramental values and loyalties of the kingship and the just promptings of Divine Providence toward men and nations.

[ii]

The values assigned to the terms "mercy" and "justice" in the Restoration period cannot be considered apart from the claims being made by Hobbists and neo-Epicureans at this time against the traditional belief in an immanent God. Both Hobbism and Epicureanism, Professor Thomas F. Mayo writes, "constituted the core of the radical element in the English thought of the seventeenth century."<sup>20</sup> The Rev. John Tillotson, for example, believed the "necessary consequences of Hobbes' views is to banish God out of the world,"<sup>21</sup> while he interpreted the revival of interest in the easy and indolent deities of Epicurus--unconcerned with the affairs of this world--as a serious affront to the orthodox view of a good, merciful, and just God who took an active part in His creation. The "sect of Epicureans," Tillotson writes, "clearly take away all evidence and arguments of divine goodness; for they supposed God to be an immortal and happy being, that enjoyed himself, and had no regard to anything without himself, that neither gave being to other things, nor concerned himself in the happiness or misery of any of them, so that their notion of a deity was in truth the proper notion of an idle being, that is called God; and neither does good nor evil."<sup>22</sup> Dryden used this idea of Epicurus' indolent deity on several occasions to disvalue Shaftesbury's faction, and in The Medall he contrasts the "jolly

god" of the republicans and libertines with the divine taskmaster of Calvin and the extreme Protestant sects:

Thy God and Theirs will never long agree.  
For thine, (if thou hast any,) must be one  
That lets the World and Humankind alone:  
A Jolly god, that passes hours too well  
To promise heav'n, or threaten us with Hell.  
That unconcern'd can at Rebellion sit;  
And wink at Crimes he did himself commit.<sup>23</sup>

As Dryden's words suggest, the image of a "jolly god," a god who allowed the wicked to flourish, the good to suffer, and nations to rise and fall by human whim, became increasingly identified in the minds of orthodox thinkers with the efforts of radicals to separate politics from theology and to desacramentalize the idea of kingship. The orthodox position was not altogether groundless. For the propaganda written by opposition to the kingship had insisted from the start that all the forms of government, all its laws, and all its methods of administration are human; they have only the remotest connection with a divine power. "Every form of Government," in Thomas Hunt's words, "is our creation not God's, and must comply with the safety of the people."<sup>24</sup> The orthodox position was made all the more delicate as we noticed in Dryden's treatment of the kingship, by the antics of Charles II. For the more inclined the King became to consign his prerogatives to his ministers and to live in the manner of a Restoration gentleman, his enemies were all the more prepared to hold him up to public view in pamphlets, diatribes, and songs as the perfect counterpart of an easy absentee Lord.

Amid these efforts to disvalue the dignity of the kingship and to secularize the idea of government, when the progress of treachery

seemed untrammelled, when good men were punished for imagined crimes and evil men "rais'd in Power and publick Office high," (148) and when, Robert Halsted says, "malice, revenge, and ambition were supported by all that falsehood and perjury could contrive,"<sup>25</sup> at such a time men were all the more disposed to doubt the justice of a God who so frequently seemed to allow the worst of men to escape sufferings and the best to undergo them, and all the more disposed to question the operations of divine providence in human affairs. Such anti-theodicean mutterings provoked several modes of argument from orthodox thinkers; but, according to Bishop Stillingfleet, "the true and full resolution of the question depends much upon the grounds and principles which were discovered to us by Divine revelation in the Scriptures, concerning the grounds of God's patience towards wicked men."<sup>26</sup>

This topic of divine patience toward the wicked was argued most eloquently and concisely at the time by John Tillotson in a famous series of sermons. Whether or not Dryden had read Tillotson's sermons is not essential to the thesis of this chapter. The sermons merely provide access to the meaning of Dryden's Absalom and Achitophel. It should be noted, however, that Dryden admired Tillotson's work and stated so on several occasions.<sup>27</sup>

Tillotson's theodicy examines the three branches of God's goodness. His mercy, His patience, and His long-suffering. The Scripture assumes, Tillotson points out, that mercy is the primary attribute of the Godhead:

the scripture doth everywhere magnify the mercy of God, and speak of it with all possible advantage; as if the divine nature, which doth in



all perfection excell all others, did in this excel itself. The scripture speaks of it as if God was wholly taken up with it, as if it was his constant exercise and employment, so that in comparison of it, he doth hardly display any other excellency . . . as if in this world, God had a design to advance his mercy above his other attributes.<sup>28</sup>

Those attributes which disclose God's goodness, Tillotson continues, "when he is said to be gracious, or merciful, and long-suffering," reveal "what God is in himself, and delights to be. Those [attributes] which declare his wrath and severity, shew what he is upon provocation and the occasion of sin; not what he chooseth to be, but what we do as it were compel and necessitate him to be."<sup>29</sup>

In response to those who have found no signs of God's influence on the affairs of men, and to those who have observed that evil is allowed to run unchecked in this world, Tillotson describes the pattern of human experience as one of "probation and trial." We live, for the most part, in the "season of God's patience." God "suffers men to walk in their own ways without any visible check and restraint, and does not usually inflict present and remarkable punishment upon them for their evil deeds."<sup>30</sup> But God is no idle monarch. He exercises His patience so that men may repent, and "nothing makes our ruin more certain, more speedy, and more intolerable, than the abuse of God's goodness and patience."<sup>31</sup> Those who mistake God's patience for His absence, in Tillotson's judgment, have misread the event of things revealed in scripture. God may exercise His "milder attributes, his goodness, and mercy and patience; but these will not always hold out. . . . All this long time of God's patience and forbearance

his wrath is kindled, and he is whetting his glittering sword, and making sharp his arrows; and this long preparation doth portend a much more dreadful execution."<sup>32</sup> When His attribute of patience has been fully abused, God in His providence often "gives some remarkable instances of his Justice upon great and notorious offenders in this life, as a pledge and earnest of a future judgment."<sup>33</sup> Nor does this "severity of God to some few" detract from His goodness. It "doth rather magnify his patience to the rest of mankind; he may be severe to some few, as a warning to many, that they may learn to make better use of his patience, and not to trespass so boldly upon it."<sup>34</sup>

In several ways the formal and substantive elements of Dryden's poem figure forth this tension in human experience, described by Tillotson, between divine patience and human perversity. Throughout the long catalogue of David's enemies, and throughout the long narration of their crimes, the reader is reminded that David's patience and mildness in the face of so many affronts is "God's beloved attribute."<sup>35</sup> The activities of Absalom and Achitophel are depicted as trials of the King's patience, and the seriousness of these offences is intensified by the several gestures Dryden makes to the dignity of the King as God's vicegerent on earth. This is ironically impressed on the reader by Absalom, who reaffirms the divine quality of his father's mercy and thereby impeaches the quality of his own actions:

What Millions has he Pardon'd of his Foes,  
Whom Just Revenge did to his Wrath expose?  
Mild, Easy, Humble, Studious of our Good;  
Enclin'd to Mercy, and averse from Blood.  
If Mildness Ill with Stubborn Isreal Suite,  
His Crime is God's beloved Attribute. (323-328)

At the close of this same speech Absalom again affirms the King's goodness: "His Favour leaves me nothing to require;/ Prevents my Wishes, and outruns Desire" (343-344). Dryden may be glancing here at the topic of one of Tillotson's sermons, where the Bishop observes how "the mercy of God, many times prevents our prayers, and outruns our wishes and desires, [and] passeth by many provocations."<sup>36</sup> The point I wish to emphasize, however, is the way Dryden uses the King's mercy to aggravate the sins of Absalom and Achitophel, and proves the King's virtues by the vices of his enemies. Dryden's decision to devote a major portion of his poem to the opposition, it seems to me, provided him with a unique metaphor for the "season of patience" and the propensity of man, in the words of St. Paul, to despise the "riches of [God's] goodness and forbearance and long-suffering" and to "treasurest up wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God" (Rom. II, 4-5).

Dryden, as I have noted, never completely ignores the weaknesses of David in the course of his satire on the opposition. And the poet's balance of praise and blame holds, too, for the King's mercy. While he carefully presses to the reader the essential goodness and mercy of the King, by documenting the crying sins of the kingdom, he just as carefully sustains a tension between the image of David-Charles, disposed to all the weaknesses and indulgences of other men, and the image of the King as a persona publica, disposed to truth and justice. In the poem, as in life, there is a fine line between a mercy that redeems and a mercy that murders. And David's mercy seems ever in danger of becoming a crime, while his patience seems

ever in danger of becoming an indulgence and token of idleness. While in the early stages of the poem, "David's mildness" gives "The Bad . . . no occasion to Rebel"; later, his misplaced mercy creates an explosive situation. For among the several factions that threaten the government, there are some, Dryden says, who "by their Monarch's fatal mercy" have become "Kinsmen to the Throne" (146). The word "Kinsmen" in this line, moreover, links David's "fatal mercy" with his role as an indulgent father; and Dryden seems to suggest here and throughout the body of his poem that the effect of such indulgence, on both Absalom and the kingdom, may prove to be ruinous.<sup>37</sup>

What may be interpreted as an indulgence on David's part, however, still serves to highlight the sins of his subjects. For if it is true that, in Tillotson's words, "nothing is more apt to make an ingenuous nature relent, than the sense of undeserved kindness,"<sup>38</sup> Dryden's strategy has the effect of amplifying the intransigence of David's enemies and improving the crown's position. Furthermore, the poem's focus on the abuses of royal mercy and patience by Absalom and Achitophel and the rest of their party provides an appropriate context for the King's speech. For, as Tillotson puts it, "nothing is more to be dreaded than despised goodness and abused patience, which turns into fury and vengeance."<sup>39</sup>

[iii]

David's speech from the throne, then, draws to a climax the tensions we have noticed building in the body of the poem between the terms father and king, mercy and justice, patience and wrath. Substantively, the speech combines an announcement of the King's

affronted patience and love with a prophecy of divine judgment, a prophecy thoroughly justified by the events and figures Dryden has catalogued in the body of the poem. In tone the speech resembles several of the imprecatory psalms of David, particularly Psalm 109:

Hold not thy peace, O God of my  
praise;  
For the mouth of the wicked and the  
mouth of the deceitful are opened against  
me; they have spoken against me with a  
lying tongue.  
They compassed me about also with words  
of hatred; and fought against me without a  
cause.  
For my love they are my adversaries:  
but I give myself unto prayer.  
And they have rewarded me evil for  
good, and hatred for my love.  
Set thou a wicked man over him: and  
let Satan stand at his right hand.  
When he shall be judged, let him be  
condemned: and let his prayer become sin.  
Let his days be few; and let another  
take his office. (Psalm CIX, 1-8)

From the outset the King emphasizes his own inclinations to mercy and patience: "Thus long have I, by native mercy sway'd,/ My wrongs dissembl'd, my revenge delay'd" (939-940). The repetition of such phrases as "long revolving," "at last his patience tir'd," "long have I . . . delay'd," "Manly tempers can the longest bear,"-- press forward the idea of royal patience as a reflection of divine patience toward the wicked. These gestures to the virtues of patience and mercy, moreover, are steadily counterpointed by evidence of the public's ingratitude:

But now so far my Clemency they slight,  
Th' Offenders question my Forgiving Right. (943-944)  
.....  
They call my tenderness of Blood, my Fear:  
Though Manly tempers can the longest bear. (947-948)

. . . . .

How ill my Fear they by my Mercy scan . . . (1004)

As in scripture, where God's mercy is compared to "the tenderest offices among men, to that of a father towards his children,"<sup>40</sup> the King's mercy is figured as a paternal posture toward Absalom and the nation at large. Thus he describes his willingness to forgive as a token of how much the "Father" does "the King assuage." And for Absalom he laments:

But oh that yet he would repent and live!  
How easie 'tis for Parents to forgive!  
With how few Tears a Pardon might be won  
From Nature, pleading for a Darling Son! (957-960)

Dryden carefully develops all these royal inclinations to mercy, paternity, and patience until the speech achieves an emotional apex: ✓

Oh that my Power to Saving were confin'd:  
Why am I forc'd, like Heaven, against my mind,  
To make Examples of another Kind?  
Must I at length the Sword of Justice draw?  
Oh curst Effects of necessary Law!  
How ill my Fear they by my Mercy scan,  
Beware the Fury of a Patient Man. (999-1005)

Here the terms Dryden has chosen to present the King's case and the terms used by Anglican divines to justify the goodness of God seem complementary. God, in Tillotson's words, is "so very slow and unwilling to punish, and to inflict his judgments upon us," and "he carries himself so that we may plainly see all the signs of [this] unwillingness; he tries to prevent them; he is loth to set about his work and when he does, it is with much reluctance."<sup>41</sup> Tillotson notes, too, that God is depicted in the book of Exodus as

loth to show His face, "keeping out of the way that he may not be tempted to destroy us."<sup>42</sup> Similarly, David laments that his enemies could not be content with divine favor (to look on Grace), but were disposed to "tempt the terror" of God's "Front" (in this context-- the law) and die (1009). The King, like God, then is presented as reluctant to exercise his sword of justice, and will do so only out of necessity. To forbear longer would make his mercy a party to murder.<sup>43</sup>

The closing lines of the speech rise to a prophecy of judgment:

By their own arts 'tis Righteously decreed,  
Those dire Artificers of Death shall bleed,  
Against themselves their Witnesses will Swear,  
Till Viper-like their Mother Plot they tear:  
And suck for Nutriment that bloody gore  
Which was their Principle of Life before (1010-1015)

By alluding here to Spenser's description of the viper, Error, and to Milton's description of Sin and Death in Paradise Lost, Dryden re-emphasizes the relationship between the viperous activities of Shaftesbury's faction and those activities traditionally associated with the Father of Lies. Dryden may have been prompted to use the image of the viper weltering in its own gore, too, by several contemporary attacks on Shaftesbury's person, which exploited his peculiar physical condition. Shaftesbury apparently suffered from a "hydatid cyst of the liver," and an operation on the cyst required him to have a tube permanently inserted in the side of his body.<sup>44</sup> In one particularly scurrilous attack, the author depicts Shaftesbury being destroyed by the "black" treason that is said to flow from the silver tap in his side: "From [his] corp [sic] , distils a floating gore,/ And the whole carcase makes one putred sore."<sup>45</sup>

Dryden's use of the viper image, however, has a more important effect. It lends the King's speech the force and appeal of a maxim. It says, in effect, that sin by its very nature is self-destructive, and it places the whole question of justice--both divine and human--in its proper perspective. For in Dryden's day the viper was still thought to be emblematic of treason and the betrayal of one's very source of life. According to legend the breeding of vipers always led to the death of both parents. The female inevitably destroyed the male, and the offspring promptly devoured their mother. Naturalists interpreted this behavior, Sir Thomas Browne writes, as "a favourable indulgence and special contrivance" of providence, as well as a token of the "justice of Nature. Providence hath contrived to abate their fruitfulness in the interest of mankind."<sup>46</sup> With Browne's words and Milton's use of the image in mind, the conjunction of those "Artificers of Death" (Shaftesbury's party) and their viperous Plot may be read as a type of Satan's consort with Sin. In both instances the unholy union proves fatal.

By this prediction that the King's enemies will "suck for Nutri-ment that bloody gore/ Which was their Principle of life before," Dryden anticipates any claims of malice on David-Charles' part and associates him with a conventional figure of providential justice--preached many times over from the Anglican pulpits.<sup>47</sup> "God," as Tillotson observes, "is patient, and when his patience is finally exhausted, he will come to make examples of his justice that we may grow to appreciate his mercy all the more."<sup>48</sup> These examples of divine justice, according to Isaac Barrow, are "rather necessary



than voluntary in respect of [God], rather a natural fruit of [men's] disposition and dealings, than a free result of his will."<sup>49</sup> And in the language of Restoration political theology, Barrow suggests that when treacherous men are brought to "welter in their own gore" it is a sure sign of providential justice:

when bloody oppressors have blood given them to drink, and come to welter in their own gore; (an accident which almost continually doth happen;) when treacherous men by their own confidants, or by themselves, are betrayed. . . . by such occurrences the finger of God doth point out and indicate itself; they speak themselves immediately to come from that just God, who doth . . . render to men answerably to their doings; who payeth men their due, sometimes in value, often in specie, according to the strictest way of reckoning.<sup>50</sup>

I am convinced by evidence of this kind that the King's speech has been shored up by a sizeable amount of theological timber, and that its terms are fully consistent with and organic to the trial of the King's patience dramatized in the body of the poem. I am persuaded further by the weight of such evidence that the doubts about the artistic and redemptive efficacy of David's speech expressed by Johnson, Professor Ferry and others may be based in part on facile readings of its context and content.

Dryden, it seems to me, was in strict control of his material, and wrote his poem with his audience clearly in mind. He hoped perhaps the speech would kindle a sense of loyalty in the people for their King, based on this final expression of royal mercy and patience provoked to wrath. For this reason he left the poem open-ended, suspended in life. Dryden's conciliatory mood and its bearing on the

poem's conclusion seems clear from remarks he made in his Preface:

Things were not brought to an Extremity where  
I left the story: There seems yet, to be room  
left for a composure; hereafter, there may only be  
for pity. I have not so much an uncharitable wish  
against Achitophel, but am content to be accused  
of a good-natured error and to hope with Origen,  
that the Devil himself may at last be sav'd. For  
which reason, in this poem, he is neither brought  
to set his house in order, nor dispose of his  
person afterwards as he in wisdom shall think fit.  
God is infinitely merciful, and his vicegerent is  
only not so because he is not infinite. (p. 216, 45-56)

The poet's conciliatory attitude may be noted further in the shift that occurs in the King's speech from an imperative to an oracular mode. The King does not prescribe a punishment; he predicts a day of judgment. And his prophecy is signaled by his use of the auxiliary shall, so common in biblical prophecies. In David's words, "The law shall direct," "votes shall no more Establish'd Pow'r controul," "no groundless Glammours shall my Friends remove," and, finally, "Those dire Artificers of Death shall bleed." With the event of things still in doubt, and with the occasion for a change in public sentiment still ripe, Dryden concluded his poem on a note of Virgillian hope that "a series of new time" would indeed begin, and "once more" a "willing nation" would "know" its "lawful Lord."<sup>51</sup>

[iv]

The shift to an oracular mode in the King's speech should suggest to us the final layer of meaning Dryden has created at the end of his poem; that is, the reaffirmation, implicit in the speech, of the civilizing force of eloquence and the fusion of David's word with God's logos. Such a reaffirmation of the power of the word, moreover,

seems remarkably appropriate, coming as it does upon a sustained assault by Achitophel and his party against the ideal of eloquent wisdom. All the major battles and minor skirmishes in the poem, it should be noted, have been fought with words, with oaths, curses, speeches, encomiums, and elegies. All the King's troubles, Achitophel correctly observes midway in Dryden's depiction of the plot, started with a "puff of Wind"--a common phrase of the period to describe an inflated and specious mode of speech: "Those heaps of People which one Sheaf did bind,/ Blown off and scatter'd by a puff of Wind" (277-278).<sup>52</sup> Achitophel apparently alludes here to the oracular performances of Titus Oates and his fellow witnesses, whose false testimony had precipitated the breach between the King and kingdom.

Such abuses of speech became a topic of countless sermons during the Restoration, and the interest of the Anglican divines in the "Right uses of the Tongue" may be traced in part, I think, to the arguments of Hobbes and others that the names assigned to moral valuations such as good and evil, just and unjust are wholly arbitrary.<sup>53</sup> The Rev. Robert South, for example, noted at this time, "that the generality of Mankind is wholly and absolutely governed by words and Names: without, nay, for the most part, even, against the knowledge Men have of things. . . . And, he who will set up for a skillful manager of the Public, so long as [he has] any understanding whereby to judge; but with two or three popular, empty words, such as Popery and Superstition, Right of the Subject, Liberty of Conscience, and Lord Jesus Christ, he may whistle them backwards and forwards, upwards and downwards, till he is weary, and [then] get upon their backs."<sup>54</sup>

Detracting, slandering, misconstruing ambiguous words, misinterpreting the appearance of things, misnaming the qualities of persons or things, assigning bad appellations or epithets to good or indifferent qualities, or giving the best quality to a bad name; all these practices were thought to be serious abuses of speech, affronts to the ideal of eloquent wisdom, and offences to the order of any civilized community.<sup>55</sup>

Abuses of this kind, critics have noticed, are associated with the opposition to kingship in Absalom and Achitophel. Dryden's regard for the problem seems most apparent, I think, in the way he insists on a contrast between the "false Achitophel" of his poem and the Achitophel depicted in the Second Book of Samuel. According to the Bible, Achitophel's council "in those days was as if a man had inquired at the oracle of God" (Sam. XVI-23). Throughout Dryden's poem, however, Achitophel invariably is described as the "false Achitophel." As the purveyor of a debased rhetoric, he is increasingly associated with the arch slanderer, the Father of Lies; in Barrow's words, "the grand defamer of God to man, of man to God, of one man to another,"<sup>56</sup> who:

By buzzing Emissaries, fills the ears  
Of listning Crowds, with Jealousies and Fears  
Of Arbitrary Counsels brought to light,  
And proves the King himself a Jebusite: (210-213)

Achitophel is particularly adept at using certain charged words to arouse the passions of the crowd ("Religion, and Redress of Grevances/ Two names that always cheat and please"), and Professor Ferry, as we have seen, has noted his habit of using the "contemptuous and peculiarly

Hobbesian formula 'no more than'" ("all Empire is no more than Power in Trust"). Throughout the poem this formula "asserts the power of the speaker to alter traditional meanings at will, simply by the force of his own re-definitions."<sup>57</sup> Achitophel's propensity to abuse and mangle traditional contexts seems obvious in his opening address to Absalom--a parody of messianic prophecies and a mélange of biblical tokens:

Auspicious Prince! at whose Nativity  
Some Royal Planet rul'd the Southern sky;  
Thy longing Countries Darling and Desire;  
Their cloudy Pillar, and their guardian Fire;  
Their second Moses, whose extended Wand  
Divides the Seas, and shews the promis'd Land:  
Whose dawning Day, in every distant age,  
Has exercis'd the Sacred Prophets rage:  
The Peoples Prayer, the glad Deviners Theam,  
The Young-mens Vision, and the Old mens Dream! (230-239)

Absalom, too, becomes adept at this cynical use of the tongue, and the effects of his fall in the poem are reflected in part by his newly furnished arts of gesture and persuasion:

His looks, his gestures, and his words he frames,  
And with familiar ease repeats their Names.  
Thus, form'd by Nature, furnish'd out with Arts,  
He glides unfelt into their secret hearts:  
Then with a kind compassionating look,  
And sighs, bespeaking pity ere he spoak,  
Few words he said; but easy those and fit:  
More slow than Hybla drops, and far more sweet. (690-697)

These abuses of speech by Absalom and Achitophel are set in unison to the sounds of the shouting, buzzing, crying, and cursing Jews. As Professor George Levine recently pointed out, the "opposition between the Satanic, and the Davidic, between disorder and order, is reflected throughout Absalom and Achitophel in the traditional contrast between the concordant harmonies of David as harpist and the discordant,

raucous sounds--sometimes noise--of his adversaries." In Levine's analysis Achitophel unites a vast and clamorous chorus of "haranguing" malcontents, which includes the "cant" and "zealous cry" of Nadab, the "harsh" voice of Corah, and the "curses" of Shimei.<sup>58</sup>

At the end of the poem, the King himself alludes to such verbal affronts by his enemies: the people who call his "tenderness" his "fear" (945), the "groundless Clamours" against his friends (995), "the countless petitions" (986), and the son, Absalom, "Gull'd with a Patriots name" (965). It is most fitting, then, for the King's own speech to reaffirm the high value assigned by Dryden and others in the Restoration to the ideal of eloquent wisdom we have seen being abused in the activities of Achitophel and his party. In this respect, the speech glances at a tradition sustained throughout the long haul of western thought from its early base in the cultures of Greece and Rome, a tradition, as Professor McLuhan has written, that "has been in continuous force in European law, letters, and politics from the time of the Greek sophists. It is most conveniently referred to as the Ciceronian ideal, since Cicero gave it to St. Augustine and St. Jerome, who in turn saw to it that it has never ceased to influence Western society. . . . Expressed in the De Oratore or in St. Augustine's De Doctrina Christiana, [it is] the ideal of rational man reaching his noblest attainment in the expression of an eloquent wisdom . . . and it became the basis for hundreds of manuals written by eloquent scholars for the education of monarchs from the fifth century, through John of Salisbury and Vincent of Beauvais, to the famous treatises of Erasmus and Castiglione."<sup>59</sup> Ratio and Oratio were thought to be the cornerstones of any civilized community and the

very underpinnings of a Christian community. In the words of Jeremy Taylor:

by voices and homelies, by questions and answers, by narratives and invectives, by counsel and reproof, by praises and hymns, by prayers and glorifications, we serve God's glory, and the necessities of men; by the tongue our tables are made to differ from mangers, our cities from deserts, our churches from herds of beasts and flocks of sheep: Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.<sup>60</sup>

It is by hearing that faith and grace are restored to the kingdom in Absalom and Achitophel. The King promises before God and before his subjects to abide by the law, and this, Tillotson observes, "is the utmost credit [he] can give to anything, and the last effort to truth and confidence among men."<sup>61</sup> Above all, the word of a magistrate "is not to be interpreted as proceeding from anger, hatred, revenge, any bad passions or humour, but as a way of needful discipline for God's service, and [the] common benefit of men. It is not indeed so much the ministers of justice, as God himself, our absolute Lord," "who by their mouth[s] rebuke[s] the obnoxious."<sup>62</sup> Dryden emphasizes this idea of the King's word as an oracle of divine justice in the verses which frame David's speech:

Thus from his Royal Throne by Heav'n inspir'd,  
The God-like David spoke: with awfull fear  
His Train their Maker in their Master hear. (936-938)

. . . . .

He said. Th' Almighty, nodding, gave Consent;  
And Peals of Thunder shook the Firmament. (1026-1027)

Furthermore, what he states explicitly in these precedent and sequent passages to the speech, Dryden dramatizes in the speech itself by emphasizing the word law: "The Law shall still direct," "the Law

teach Rebels to Obey," "Oh curst Effects of necessary Law," "Law they require, let Law then shew her Face." Such phrases underscore David's status as an oracle of justice, and transmute both King and kingship into a "speaking law."

Here Dryden confronts us with a very old idea, preserved by the ancients in countless paintings and statues of the monarch, poised before his subjects, his right hand extended in this gestus oratorius. To appreciate such a speech gesture, H. P. L'Orange has written, "one must consider what might be called the rhetorical 'style of life' of antiquity. One must bear in mind the central position held by rhetoric in private and official life from school-days right through the whole life of the citizen. . . . To antiquity in a quite special way the eloquent wording gives to the thought life and power."<sup>63</sup> Here the stresses on the word "law" in David's speech become especially significant. For this gestus oratorius, Professor Vernon Arnold tells us, involved the assumption that a "state can be ordered by wise laws." And in Arnold's judgment this brings us squarely before the theory of the logos; that is, the belief in a divine power, the Creating Word, and, more specifically, the belief that this divine power is communicated to man.<sup>64</sup> As Arnold puts it, the belief that "a state can be ordered by wise laws," and the belief in the logos "lead up to the same point. The same eternal wisdom through which the primal stuff took shape is, in another function, the Right Rule . . . which commands and forbids."<sup>65</sup>

It is in this final context, I believe, that the King's word should be taken as an end to all strife. As the noted



translator of Lucretius, Thomas Creech, asked several years after Dryden published Absalom and Achitophel, "how can we . . . who have such a perfect knowledge of a Creation, who hear wisdom proclaim that by her King's reign, who made it an article in Edward the 6th's time, and now every day in our prayers profess that God is the only ruler of Princes," that "God alone is the giver of Power," that "the Prince" is "a living Image of the Deity"; how can we, Creech asks, declare the "people" to be "the only spring and fountain of Power?"<sup>66</sup>

Creech's point seems to me to be implicit in everything Dryden has to say about the kingship at the end of Absalom and Achitophel. For the King's speech is the final gesture in a whole chaplet of gestures we have seen Dryden carefully binding together in the course of his poem, gestures clearly defining the divine source of David's authority; and if we refuse to accept this fact we do violence to both the logic and tenor of Dryden's entire work. If we accept, in sum, the numerous references throughout the poem to "God-like David," to a David who reigns "in Sion," to David the "Lord's annointed," to the David "heav'n by Wonders has Espous'd," to the David whose mercy and patience are "God's beloved attributes," to the David whose title is drawn from the very ark of God's covenant and the very seat of His presence on earth, if we accept all this, we must accept, too, as an unequivocal fact and consequence of the whole fictive fabric of Dryden's Absalom and Achitophel, that in the end David's word and God's Word are fully reciprocal, that this indeed is the word of Him who commands and creates or forbids and destroys for all time. The King, as Dryden stated it so eloquently some

years later, "Plights his Faith, and we believe him just";

His Honour is to Promise, ours to Trust.  
Thus Britain's Basis on a Word is laid,<sup>67</sup>  
As by a Word the World itself was made.

Nothing, to be sure, has been resolved in the way Samuel Johnson would have wished; but, in Professor Maynard Mack's words, "for the confrontation of values that the poem dramatizes," everything has been resolved.<sup>68</sup>

The King's speech, then, completes the scenes and events dramatized in the body of Dryden's poem, it gathers up all the strands of his proofs for the mercy and patience of both the King and God-head toward an ungrateful nation, it reaffirms the worth of eloquent wisdom to a civilized community, and it conflates, unequivocally, the King's word, the law, and the logos. Some critics may still find the speech unconvincing; and, in the final analysis, such an uneasy response to the conclusion of Absalom and Achitophel may stir from time to time in all of us. No amount of explication, perhaps, and no amount of patching together the fragile remains will fully repair, much less restore, the ideal John Dryden had in mind when he composed his poem. For even by Alexander Pope's day, as Professor Mack has pointed out, the ideal of "the throne as center of the dream of the civilized community has become absurd."<sup>69</sup> But this is not a compelling reason to refuse Dryden his due, or to ignore what is lasting in his work. To Dryden the monarchy did matter, and, as Mack puts it, "in his finest poems" he "speaks as if the Establishment, with the monarchy its center, spoke through him."<sup>70</sup> His muse is preeminently a public muse, blaming and praising that most basic

of human drives, the will to dominion, lashing its propensity to self-glorification, superiority, profit, and success, honoring its calling to human endeavor, authority, justice, and perfection. In all of this, through the metaphor of the monarchy, Dryden's muse never lets us forget that the ability to rule is not merely man's advantage, but also his test as a person; and, as such, irrespective of the various forms it may take over the years, it can never be consigned to the level of natural forces. For in the final analysis, as Romano Guardini has reminded us, "the quality of cultures is determined by the decisions of the spirit."<sup>71</sup>

## NOTES

1. Samuel Johnson, Lives of the English Poets, ed. by George Birkbeck Hill (Oxford, 1905), I, 437-438.
2. Dryden's decision to conclude his poem with the King's speech has been defended in several recent studies. Most notably by Arthur Hoffman, John Dryden's Imagery (Gainesville, Fla., 1962), p. 88, and by Bernard N. Schilling, Dryden and the Conservative Myth: A Reading of Absalom and Achitophel (New Haven, 1961), pp. 266-290. Edwin Morgan, however, in Dryden's Drudging," in Dryden: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by Bernard N. Schilling (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1963), p. 67, finds the poem's treatment of kingship unsatisfactory. In his words, "the series of dull and fulsome hyperbolies relating to David and the state of kingship have in them something contemptible and are far from spreading a sense of the order Dryden no doubt had in mind to oppose faction and sedition. He rightly admired his portrait of Zimri, but what are we to say of David's speech. . . . Not only is the tone different, but the wit which sustained the portrait has been lost, and the heavier substitute fails to impress, though it might be expected to carry a greater significance." Earl Miner in Dryden's Poetry (Bloomington, 1967), p. 140, appears to hedge over the appropriateness of the King's speech. "The two parts of the poem which," in his judgment, "least fit into a . . . legitimate conception of history are the opening and close of the poem." The statement is perplexing in the light of Dryden's claim in his preface that he contrived the conclusion to Absalom and Achitophel in deference to the historical situation.
3. Anne Davidson Ferry, Milton and the Miltonic Dryden (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), p. 114.
4. Ibid., p. 115.
5. Joseph Spence, Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men, ed. by James M. Osborn (Oxford, 1966), No. 66, pp. 28-29.
6. Godfrey Davies, "The Conclusion of Dryden's Absalom and Achitophel," HLQ, X (1946-47), 80.
7. The claims for a constitutional monarchy and for the need to abide by the law, which Davies finds peculiar to both the King's declaration of April, 1681, and David's speech, were made by all

the apologists for the crown. For a helpful contemporary analysis of these arguments see Gilbert Burnet, History of My Own Times, ed. by Osmund Airy (Oxford, 1900), II, 214.

8. In John Dryden, His Majesties Declaration Defended, in Augustan Reprint Society Publications (Los Angeles, 1950), No. 23, p. ii.

9. Ibid., p. 3.

10. K. H. D. Haley, The First Earl of Shaftesbury (Oxford, 1968), p. 661. Davies, "The Conclusion of Dryden's Absalom and Achitophel," p. 71, insists, on the other hand, that "No Tory writer, including Dryden, had up to this time singled out Shaftesbury as the great conspirator and excepting Dryden, no one apparently so stigmatized him in the interval between his arrest and trial."

11. The Wilkinson story was made public in mid-September. See Haley, p. 675. Wilkinson himself wrote an account of the incident entitled The information of Captain Henry Wilkinson, What hath passed betwixt him and some other persons, who have attempted to prevail with him to swear high treason against the Earl of Shaftesbury (London, 1681).

12. Robert Ferguson, No Protestant-Plot: or the Present Pretended Conspiracy of Protestants against the King and Government (London, 1681).

13. Ibid., p. 9.

14. Ibid., p. 4.

15. Ibid., p. 12.

16. Ibid., p. 5.

17. Haley, p. 670, has established the approximate date of the appearance of Ferguson's pamphlet as October 13th on the basis of notices in The Newsletter, October 13th, 1681, and references to the stir created by the work in the Letters of Humphrey Prideaux, ed. by E. M. Thompson (London, 1875), p. 115. Ferguson, Haley points out, did not claim authorship of the pamphlet until some months later, and for a time "John Locke's enemies at Oxford, probably mistakenly, saw the philosopher's hand in it." The problem of dating Dryden's poem is discussed by James Kinsley, The Poems of John Dryden (Oxford, 1958), IV, 1877.

18. Haley, p. 671.

19. Phillip Harth, Contexts of Dryden's Thought (Chicago, 1968), p. 67.

20. Thomas F. Mayo, Epicurus in England (College Station, Texas, 1934), p. 143. For Dryden's response to Hobbism in Absalom and Achitophel see Chapter I above. His satire on the neo-Epicureans is discussed in Chapter II.

21. John Tillotson, Sermons on Several Subjects and Occasions (Longond, 1748), VII, 148.

22. Ibid., VIII, 195.

23. The Poems, I, 260, lines 276-280. All subsequent references to Dryden's poetry are according to this text.

24. Thomas Hunt, The great and weighty considerations, relating to the Duke of York (London, 1680), pp. 5-13.

25. Robert Halstead, Succinct Genealogies (London, 1685), p. 433.

26. Edward Stillingfleet, Origines Sacrae or a Rational Account of the Grounds of Christian Faith, as to the Truth and Divine Authority of the Scriptures, and the matters therein contained (London, 1666), p. 519.

27. It has been suggested that the "Judicious and Learned Friend" Dryden mentions in his Preface to Religio Laici may have been Tillotson. See David Brown, "Dryden's 'Religio Laici' and the 'Judicious and Learned Friend,'" MLR, LVI (1961), 66-69.

28. Tillotson, VIII, 247.

29. Ibid., p. 245.

30. Ibid., p. 294.

31. Ibid., p. 320.

32. Ibid., p. 304

33. Ibid., p. 294.

34. Ibid., p. 281.

35. The idea that the "God of patience" grants men "to be like minded" (Rom. XV-5) is pervasive in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Dryden, furthermore, could have drawn his material from a long-standing tradition in which the mercy and patience of God and God's vicegerent were thought to be fully reciprocal. A Christian prince, John of Salisbury observed, is "slow to wrath and grieves when called upon to inflict the punishment which guilt demands, and yet administers it with a reluctant right hand. For the prince has

no left hand, and in subjecting to pain the member of the body of which he is the head, he obeys the law in sadness and with groans." See The Statesman's Book of John of Salisbury, ed. by John Dickenson (New York, 1927), p. 37. Significantly, in the Renaissance King David was depicted in such works as George Peele's David and Bathsheba [sic] as "the Christian figure of patience." See Inga-Stina Ewbank, "The House of David in Renaissance Drama: A Comparative Study," in Renaissance Drama, ed. by S. Schoenbaum (Evanston, 1965), VIII, 30.

The King's attribute of mercy, on the other hand, was a matter of particular concern at the time of the exclusion crisis. When impeachment proceedings were initiated by the House of Commons against Lord Treasurer Danby, the King arranged for a pardon. According to Burnet, the Commons "questioned whether the King's pardon . . . was good in law," while others believed "that the power of pardoning was a main article of the King's prerogative." A royal grant of mercy had never "been annulled," and the "law had made this one of the trusts of government." Danby, writing in his own defense, believes "the King's justice" to be "founded by rules for the most part, but his mercy" to be without "limits." It is "an essential part of our liberties," he says, "that the King be invested with a fullness of power to show mercy." For Burnet's comments and Danby's defense of royal mercy, see Burnet, II, 206-207.

36. Tillotson, VIII, 271.

37. The catch phrase "mercy murders" goes back to antiquity, but for the seventeenth century the locus classicus may have been the Prince's speech at the end of the first scene in Act III of Romeo and Juliet: "Mercy but murders, pardoning those that kill." Dryden and Nahum Tate treat the problem explicitly in The Second Part of Absalom and Achitophel:

Then Justice Wake, and Rigour take her time.  
For Lo! Our Mercy is become our Crime.  
While hauling Punishment her stroke delays,  
Our Sov'reign Right, Heav'n's Sacred Trust, decays; (733-736)

38. Tillotson, VIII, 238.

39. Ibid., p. 237.

40. Ibid., p. 246.

41. Ibid., p. 270.

42. Ibid., p. 271.

43. Dryden's critics have found it difficult to disengage the solemn aura of David's speech from their image of Charles II. Dryden tells us, however, that the King is by "heav'n inspir'd," and he depicts the King as a persona publica. The person of Charles II,

therefore, becomes submerged at the end of Absalom and Achitophel--though never entirely irrelevant. For in all Dryden's occasional poetry, Arthur Hoffman has observed, the "structure of compliment" becomes a mandate and "burden of obligation. The very excesses, the most arbitrary flights of praise creating the heroic model," may "elevate the person praised to a lofty pinnacle," but may also have "the effect of exposing him." Such a "structure of compliment" can "create a transfiguring nembus," and can "also search and probe with brilliant shafts." And "just beneath the surface of compliment are perilous rocks upon which kings have foundered." See Hoffman, p. 11.

44. Haley, p. 204.

45. Cited from Haley, p. 661.

46. Thomas Browne, The Works, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1927), new edition, 1964, II, 209. The tradition has been discussed by John Stedman, "Sin, Echidna and the Viper's Brood," MLR, LVI (1961), 62-66.

47. The theme of providential justice and its importance for our understanding of Restoration drama has been discussed by Aubrey Williams in "Poetic Justice, the Contrivances of Providence and the Works of William Congreve," ELH, XXXV (1968), 540-565.

48. Tillotson, VIII, 269.

49. Isaac Barrow, The Theological Works, ed. by Alexander Napier (Cambridge, 1859), III, 504.

50. Ibid., I, 468.

51. The Virgilian echoes in the conclusion to Dryden's poem are discussed by R. G. Peterson, "Larger Manners and Events: Sallust and Virgil in Absalom and Achitophel," PMLA, LXXXII (1967), 243-244.

52. In a sermon on "The Fatal Imposture and Force of Words," Robert South discusses the ill effects of these "Puffs of Wind" on a civilized community. See Forty-Eight Sermons (London, 1715), p. 338.

53. Hobbes' nominalism is discussed by Samuel I. Mintz, The Hunting of Leviathan (Cambridge, 1962), p. 25.

54. South, p. 335.

55. These abuses of speech are enumerated and fully discussed in a series of sermons on Evil Speaking by Isaac Barrow, II, 1-200.

56. Ibid., p. 129.

57. Ferry, p. 64.



58. George R. Levin, "Dryden's 'Inarticulate Poesy,' Music and the Davidic King in Absalom and Achitophel," Eighteenth-Century Studies, I (1968), 291-312.
59. H. M. McLuhan, "Edgar Poe's Tradition," Sewanee Review LII (1944), 25.
60. Jeremy Taylor, The Whole Works (London, 1855), IV, 274.
61. Tillotson, II, 50-51.
62. Barrow, II, 74-75.
63. H. P. L'Orange, Studies in the Iconography of Cosmic Kingship in the Ancient World (Oslo, 1953), p. 181.
64. E. Vernon Arnold, Roman Stoicism (New York, 1958), p. 273.
65. Ibid.
66. Titus Lucretius Carus, His Six Books of Epicurean Philosophy done into English verse, with notes, by Thomas Creech (Oxford, 1683), p. 54 of The Notes.
67. The passage is from Dryden's Epilogue to Albion and Albanus. Aubrey Williams in The Yale Review, LI (1962), 615-620, first noticed its relevance to the King's speech in Absalom and Achitophel.
68. Maynard Mack, ed., The Augustans (second edition; Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1962), p. 9.
69. Maynard Mack, "The Shadowy Cave: Some Speculations on Twickenham Grotto," in Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature: Essays in Honor of Alan Dugald McKillop, ed. by Carroll Camden (Toronto, 1963), p. 86.
70. Ibid.
71. Romano Guardini, Power and Responsibility: A Course of Action for the New Age, trans. by Elinor C. Briefs (Chicago, 1961), p. 55.

## CONCLUSION

John Dryden's Absalom and Achitophel, we have noticed, moves from the image of kingdom and kingship threatened by a secular view of obligations to the image of kingdom and kingship restored by the Word and the affirmation of a sacramental view of obligations; from the disorder of sin to the re-order of grace; from the language of blame to the language of praise; and in the geography of the poem from the contentious and acquisitive atmosphere of London to the solemnity of Oxford.<sup>1</sup> This movement and confrontation of values dramatized in Absalom and Achitophel, I think, pinpoints some of the problems of providing a perspective to fully appreciate Dryden's occasional poetry, and highlights the deficiencies of critics who simply have dismissed Dryden's poetry as occasional and therefore facile.<sup>2</sup>

A close study of the poem suggests, first of all, that Dryden's mature public position on the political and theological issues of his age involves a trenchant response, not to parties or factions as such; but, more precisely, to those heresies of Hobbism, Epicureanism, and Enthusiasm so very tangled in the sinews of orthodox thought throughout the Restoration period. Certainly the explanation I have provided for this ideological context oversimplifies in several ways just how knotty and ambiguous the issues of orthodoxy and irreligion had become by Dryden's day, but my own mistakes should underscore the need to study the context of his art even further. Dryden's position,

moreover, was based on a kind of eclecticism that has been easily muffled by cumbersome appraisals or mangled by glib descriptions. While he deplored the free thinking of Hobbes and the neo-Epicureans, he admired and respected Hobbes' mind, appreciated and translated from the sourcebook of Epicurean thought, De Rerum Natura, and stoutly defended the "freedom of inquiry which 'takes nothing from antiquity on trust.'"<sup>3</sup> While he was indisposed to what may have been a reaction to the freethinkers in the form of religious Enthusiasm and while he harbored a deep and lasting contempt for "priestcraft," he insisted all his life on the "inforcement of 'Sacred Truth.'"<sup>4</sup> And while he consistently espoused the ideal of kingship, he did not falter before the weaknesses and indiscretions of a king.

In the final analysis, however, Dryden should be judged by his art: an art that proceeds by exposing ideas to the test of human experience, placing them under the optic of history and illuminating them with a spectrum of larger events from the past, or by providing them with the focus of places--an Oxford, Stonehenge, Dover, or London--as the loci of values and composites of the greater world. This urge, as Professor Wasserman has put it, "to make recent political events the metaphorical base of much of its thought" and to realize the suggestiveness of places was probably "inherent in the temper of the age."<sup>5</sup> But I think it needs to be emphasized even further that such a way of assessing the times was grounded on a long established habit of seeing in the happenings of history the insinuations of Divine Providence. Providence, as we have seen, functions as the very postulate of Dryden's Absalom and Achitophel. The poem's conflation of Jewish

history and English history, its play upon the strengths of weakness, and its capacity for the ironic arrangements of divine justice--all these facets of its meaning seem to me to be determined and circumscribed by Dryden's belief in the essential openness of the creation to the just ordinations of its Creator.

This poem, like so many of Dryden's poems and plays, depicts in a special way what John Wilkins, a founder of the Royal Society, described as a "rough season" in the affairs of men and nations, a poetic gesture to the proposition so often set forth in the period that art should imitate the divine factor in nature. Glancing at the curious train of events in seventeenth-century England, Wilkins puts it this way: "how strangely," he says, "hath the whole course of things both in Church and State, been turned about, beyond all men's imagination? How hath God in every respect, and on all sides, puzzled the wisdom of the wise, and enfeebled the strength of the mighty, abating the glory of all humane power, lifting himself above others, effecting great matters by dispised means!"<sup>6</sup> The "observance of God's works and dispensations is a duty always seasonable," Wilkins concludes, but it is all the more a duty of the "writer" and "the Historian" in "such times as these," in "times that are full of change and vicissitude," in times that are "disturbed" and "confused," and "may be best improved by observation." For these are the times "that do most set forth the wisdom of Providence."<sup>7</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Arthur Hoffman, in John Dryden's Imagery (Gainesville, Fla., 1962), p. 86, has noted the symbolic values of London and Oxford in Absalom and Achitophel.
2. For the kind of response I have in mind see A. L. French, "Dryden, Marvell, and Political Poetry," SEL, VIII (1968), 397-414.
3. Phillip Harth, Contexts of Dryden's Thought (Chicago, 1968), p. 30.
4. Ibid., p. 42.
5. Earl R. Wasserman, The Subtler Language (Baltimore, 1959), pp. 17-18.
6. John Wilkins, Sermons Preach'd Upon Several Occasions Before the King at White-Hall (London, 1680), p. 143.
7. Ibid., p. 142.

# WORKS CITED

- Adams, Henry H. English Domestic or Homiletic Tragedy, 1575-1642.  
New York, 1943.
- Allen, Don Cameron. Doubt's Boundless Sea: Skepticism and Faith in the Renaissance. Baltimore, 1964.
- Andrewes, Lancelot. Ninety-Six Sermons. 5 vols. Oxford, 1841.
- Anonymous. Great and Weighty Considerations Relating to the . . . Succession of the Crown. London, 1679.
- \_\_\_\_\_. A Letter from a Person of Quality in Scotland to a Person of Honour in London, . . . in The Somers's Tracts. Edited by Walter Scott. 13 vols. London, 1812. Vol. VIII.
- Atterbury, Frances. Forty Three Sermons and Discourses on Several Subjects and Occasions. London, 1723.
- Aubrey, John. Brief Lives. Edited by Andrew Clark. Oxford, 1898.
- Augustine, St. The Good of Marriage. Translated by Charles T. Wilcox. In The Fathers of the Church. Edited by J. Deferrari. 58 vols. New York, 1955. Vol. XXVII.
- Baker, Herschel. The Wars of Truth: Studies in the Decay of Christian Humanism in the Earlier Seventeenth Century. Cambridge, Mass., 1952.
- Barrow, Isaac. The Theological Works. Edited by Alexander Napier. 9 vols. Cambridge, 1859.
- Baxter, Richard. The second part of the Non-conformists plea for peace. London, 1680.
- Blount, Charles. An appeal from the country to the city, for the preservation of His Majesties person. London, 1679.
- Bowle, George. Hobbes and his Critics. London, 1951.
- Brett, R. L. "Thomas Hobbes." In The English Mind: Studies in the English Moralists Presented to Basil Willey. Edited by Hugh Sykes Davies and George Watson. Cambridge, 1964.

Brodwin, Leonora Leet. "Miltonic Allusion in Absalom and Achitophel: Its Function in the Political Satire," JEGP, LXVIII (1969), 24-44.

Brown, David. "Dryden's 'Religio Laici' and the 'Judicious and Learned Friend,'" MLR, LVI (1961), 66-69.

Browne, Thomas. The Works. Edited by Geoffrey Keynes. 4 vols. London, 1927. New Edition, 1964.

Bullinger, Heinrich. The Christian State of Matrimonye. Translated by Myles Coverdale. London, 1541.

Burnet, Gilbert. History of My Own Times. Edited by Osmund Airy. 3 vols. Oxford, 1900.

Cavendish, Williams, 1st Duke of Devonshire. Reasons for Majesty's passing the Bill of Exclusion. In a Letter to a Friend. In The Somers's Tracts. Edited by Walter Scott. 13 vols. London, 1812. Vol. VIII.

Chambers, A. B. "Absalom and Achitophel: Christ and Satan," MLN, LXXXIV (1959), 592-596.

Crane, R. S. "Anglican Apologetics and the Idea of Progress, 1699-1745," MP, XXXI (1934), 273-306, 359-382.

Crashaw, Richard. The Poems. Edited by L. C. Martin. Oxford, 1957.

Davies, Godfrey. "The Conclusion of Dryden's Absalom and Achitophel," HLQ, X (1946-47), 69-82.

Dickinson, John, ed. The Statesman's Book of John of Salisbury. New York, 1927.

Dryden, John. Dedication of Aeneis. In The Poems of John Dryden. Edited by James Kinsley. 4 vols. Oxford, 1958. Vol. I.

\_\_\_\_\_. Epistle to the Whigs. In The Poems of John Dryden. Edited by James Kinsley. 4 vols. Oxford, 1958. Vol. I.

\_\_\_\_\_. His Majesties Declaration Defended (1681). In Augustan Reprint Society Publications. Los Angeles, 1950. No. 23.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Life of Lucian. In The Works of John Dryden. Edited by Sir Walter Scott. Revised by George Saintesbury. 18 vols. Edinburgh, 1883. Vol. XVIII.

\_\_\_\_\_. Ovid's Metamorphoses Book XV. In The Poems of John Dryden. Edited by James Kinsley. 4 vols. Oxford, 1958. Vol. IV.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Poems of John Dryden. Edited by James Kinsley. 4 vols. Oxford, 1958. Vol. I. (1878).

- \_\_\_\_\_. The Poetical Works of John Dryden. Edited by George R. Noyes. Cambridge, Mass., 1909. Revised, 1950.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "To His Grace the Duke of Ormond, Etc.," In The Works of John Dryden. Edited by Sir Walter Scott, Revised by George Saintesbury. 18 vols. Edinburgh, 1883. Vol. V.
- Eachard, John. Some opinions of Mr. Hobbes considered. London, 1673.
- Eliade, Mircea. Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return. Translated by Willard R. Trask. Published first in 1954 under the title, The Myth of the Eternal Return. Reprinted, 1959, Harper & Brothers: Torchbook Series.
- Emslie, McD. "Dryden's Couplets: Wit and Conversation," Essays in Criticism, XI (1961), 264-273.
- Ewbank, Inga-Stina. "The House of David in Renaissance Drama: A Comparative Study." In Renaissance Drama. Edited by S. Schoenbaum. Evanston, 1965. Vol. VIII.
- Falkner, William. Christian loyalty. London, 1679.
- Ferguson, Robert. No Protestant-Plot: or the Present Pretended Conspiracy of Protestants against the King and Government. London, 1681.
- Ferry, Anne Davidson. Milton and the Miltonic Dryden. Cambridge, Mass., 1968.
- Figgis, John Neville. The Divine Right of Kings. London, 1896. Reprinted, 1965, Harper & Brothers: Torchbook Series.
- Filmer, Sir Robert. Patriarcha. Edited by Peter Laslett. Oxford, 1949.
- Fisch, Harold. Jerusalem and Albion: The Hebraic Factor in Seventeenth-Century Literature. New York, 1964.
- Fleischmann, Wolfgang Bernard. Lucretius and English Literature. Paris, 1963.
- Freedman, Morris. "Dryden's Miniature Epic," JEGP, LVII (1958), 211-219.
- French, A. L. "Dryden, Marvell, and Political Poetry," SEL, VIII (1968), 397-414.
- Frye, Northrop. "The Typology of Paradise Regained." In Milton: Modern Essays in Criticism. Edited by Arthur E. Barker. New York, 1965.



- Fuller, Thomas. David's Hainous Sinne. London, 1631.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Holy State and the Profane State. Edited by M. G. Walton. London, 1938.
- Gilson, Etienne. The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy. Translated by A. H. C. Downes. New York, 1940.
- Greenleaf, W. H. Order, Empiricism and Politics; Two Traditions of English Political Thought, 1500-1700. London, 1964.
- Guardini, Romano. Power and Responsibility: A Course of Action for the New Age. Translated by Elinor C. Briefs. Chicago, 1961.
- Hale, Matthew. The primitive origination of mankind considered and examined according to the light of nature. London, 1677.
- Haley, K. H. D. The First Earl of Shaftesbury. Oxford, 1968.
- Halsted, Robert. Succinct Genealogies. London, 1685.
- Harris, Robert. Absalom's Funerall: Preached at Bamburie. . . . London, 1611.
- Harth, Phillip. Contexts of Dryden's Thought. Chicago, 1968.
- Hobbes, Thomas. Leviathan or the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth-Ecclesiastical and Civil. Edited with an introduction by Michael Oakeshott. Oxford, 1960.
- Hoffman, Arthur. John Dryden's Imagery. Gainesville, Fla., 1962.
- Hooker, Edward N. "Dryden and the Atoms of Epicurus," In Dryden: A Collection of Critical Essays. Edited by Bernard N. Schilling. Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1963.
- Hooker, Richard. The Works. Edited by John Keble. 3 vols. London, 1888.
- Hosea. In The Holy Bible. The King James Version. New York, 1964.
- Hunt, Thomas. The great and weighty considerations, relating to the Duke of York. London, 1680.
- Hunter, J. Paul. The Reluctant Pilgrim: Defoe's Emblematic Method and Quest for Form in Robinson Crusoe. Baltimore, 1966.
- Hyde, Edward, 1st Earl of Clarendon. A brief view and survey of the dangerous and pernicious errors to church and state, in Mr. Hobbes' book entitled Leviathan. Oxford, 1676.

- Johnson, Samuel. Lives of the English Poets. Edited by George Birkbeck Hill. 3 vols. Oxford, 1905.
- Jones, J. R. The First Whigs: The Politics of the Exclusion Crisis, 1678-1683. London, 1961.
- The Judgment and Decree of the University of Oxford, passed in their Convocation, July 2, 1683, . . . In The Somers's Tracts. Edited by Walter Scott. 13 vols. London, 1812. Vol. VIII.
- Jusserand, J. J. A French Ambassador at the Court of Charles the Second. London, 1892.
- Kantorowicz, Ernst H. The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology. Princeton, 1957.
- King, Henry. A Sermon Preached on . . . the 29th of May. London, 1661.
- Lee, Maurice, Jr. The Cabal. Urbana, 1965.
- Lee Nathaniel. The Works of Nathaniel Lee. Edited by Thomas B. Stroup and Arthur L. Cooke. 2 vols. New Brunswick, N. J., 1955.
- Leigh, Richard. Censure of the Rota. Oxford, 1673.
- Levine, George R. "Dryden's 'Inarticulate Poesy,' Music and the Davidic King in Absalom and Achitophel," Eighteenth-Century Studies. I (1968), 291-312.
- Lewalski, Barbara K., "The Scope and Function of Biblical Allusion in Absalom and Achitophel," ELN, III (1965), 29-35.
- L'Orange, H. P. Studies in the Iconography of Cosmic Kingship in the Ancient World. Oslo, 1953.
- Mack, Maynard, ed. The Augustans. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1962.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Shadowy Cave: Some Speculations on Twickenham Grotto." In Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature: Essays in Honor of Alan Dugald McKillop. Edited by Carroll Camden. Toronto, 1963.
- Mayo, Thomas F. Epicurus in England. College Station, Texas, 1934.
- McBryde, John McLaren, Jr. "A Study of Cowley's Davideis," JEGP, II (1898), 454-527.
- McLuhan, H. M. "Edgar Poe's Tradition," Sewanee Review LII (1944), 24-33.

- Miller, Perry. The New England Mind. 2 vols. New York, 1939. Reprinted, 1961, Beacon Press: Beacon Paperback.
- Milton, John. Complete Poems and Major Prose. Edited by Merritt Y. Hughes. New York, 1957.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates. In Complete Poems and Major Prose. Edited by Merritt Y. Hughes. New York, 1957.
- Miner, Earl. Dryden's Poetry. Bloomington, 1967.
- Mintz, Samuel I. The Hunting of Leviathan. Cambridge, 1962.
- Morgan, Edwin. "Dryden's Drudging." In Dryden: A Collection of Essays. Edited by Bernard N. Schilling. Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1963.
- Neibuhr, Reinhold. "Coronation Afterthoughts," Christian Century, LXX (July, 1953), 771-772.
- Patrick, Symon. Angliae Speculum: A glass that flatters not; . . . In a parallel between the kingdom of Israel and England. Wherein the whole nation is desired to behold our sin, and our danger. London, 1678.
- Paulson, Ronald. The Fictions of Satire. Baltimore, 1967.
- Peake, Charles H. "Domestic Tragedy in Relation to Theology in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century." University of Michigan Dissertation. Ann Arbor, 1941.
- Peterson, R. G. "Larger Manners and Events: Sallust and Virgil in Absalom and Achitophel," PMLA, LXXXII (1967), 236-244.
- Price, Martin. To the Palace of Wisdom. New York, 1964.
- Prideaux, Humphrey. The Letters of Humphrey Prideaux. Edited by E. M. Thompson. London, 1875.
- Pollock, John. The Popish Plot. London, 1903.
- Ricks, Christopher. "Dryden's Absalom," Essays in Criticism. XI (1961), 273-289.
- Ronalds, Francis S. The Attempted Whig Revolution of 1678-1681. Urbana, 1937.
- Roper, Alan. Dryden's Poetic Kingdoms. New York, 1965.
- Schilling, Bernard N. Dryden and the Conservative Myth: A Reading of Absalom and Achitophel. New Haven, 1961.

- Schless, Howard, ed. Poems on Affairs of State: Augustan Satirical Verse, 1660-1714. New Haven, 1968. Vol. III.
- Shadwell, Thomas. The Virtuoso. Edited by Marjorie Hope Nicolson and David Stuart Rodes. Regents Restoration Drama Series. Lincoln, Neb., 1966.
- Sherlock, William. Sermons Preach'd upon Several Occasions. London, 1702.
- Skinner, Quentin. "The Ideological Context of Hobbes' Political Thought," The Historical Journal, IX (1966), 286-317.
- South, Robert. Forty-Eight Sermons. 4 vols. London, 1715.
- Spence, Joseph. Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men. Edited by James M. Osborn. 2 vols. Oxford, 1966.
- Stedman, John. "Sin, Echidna and the Viper's Brood," MLR, LVI (1961), 62-66.
- Stillingleet, Edward. Origines Sacrae or a Rational Account of the Grounds of Christian Faith, as to the Truth and Divine Authority of the Scriptures, and the Matters therein contained. London, 1666.
- Straka, Gerald M. Anglican Reaction to the Revolution of 1688. Madison, 1962.
- Taylor, Jeremy. The Whole Works. 10 vols. London, 1855.
- Teeter, Louis. "The Dramatic use of Hobbes' Political Ideas," ELH, III (1936), 140-169.
- Tillotson, John. Sermons on Several Subjects and Occasions. 12 vols. London, 1748.
- Titus Lucretius Carus. His Six Books of Epicurean Philosophy, done into English verse, with notes. Translated by Thomas Creech. Oxford, 1683.
- Underwood, Dale. Etherege and the Seventeenth-Century Comedy of Manners. New Haven, 1957.
- Van Doren, Mark. John Dryden: A Study of His Poetry. New York, 1920. Reprinted, 1960, Indiana University Press; Midland Books.
- Wallace, John M. "Dryden and History: A Problem in Allegorical Reading," ELH, XXXVI (1969), 265-290.
- Walzer, Michael. The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics. Cambridge, Mass., 1965.
- Ward, Charles E. The Life of John Dryden. Chapel Hill, 1961.

- Warrender, Howard. The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: His Theory of Obligation. Oxford, 1957.
- Wasserman, Earl R. The Subtler Language. Baltimore, 1959.
- Wellington, James E. "Conflicting Concepts of Man in Dryden's Absalom and Achitophel," Satire Newsletter, IV (1966), 2-11.
- Wilkins, John. Sermons Preach'd Upon Several Occasions Before the King at White-Hall. London, 1680.
- Wilkinson, Henry. The information of Captain Henry Wilkinson, What hath passed betwixt him and some other persons, who have attempted to prevail with him to swear high treason against the Earl of Shaftesbury. London, 1681.
- Willet, Andrew. An Harmonie upon the Second Book of Samuel, . . . Cambridge, 1614.
- Williams, Aubrey. "The Achievement of John Dryden," The Yale Review, LI (1962), 615-620.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Congreve's Incognita and the Contrivances of Providence," In Imagined Worlds: Essays on Some English Novels and Novelists in Honour of John Butt. Edited by Maynard Mack and Ian Gregor. London, 1968.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Poetic Justice, the Contrivances of Providence and the Works of William Congreve," ELH,. XXXV (1968), 540-565.
- Wimsatt, William K., and Brooks, Cleanth. Literary Criticism: A Short History. New York, 1957. Reprinted, 1967, Random House: Vintage Books.
- Winterbottom, John A. "The Place of Hobbesian Ideas in Dryden's Tragedies," JEGP, LVIII (1958), 665-683.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Michael J. Conlon was born in Hartford, Connecticut, on March 23, 1936. He attended elementary and secondary schools in Branford, Connecticut, and was graduated from the Cheshire Academy. In 1955 he entered the University of Notre Dame. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Notre Dame in 1959, and a Master of Arts degree from the University of Kentucky in 1961. From 1961 until 1964 he was an instructor at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. In the fall of 1964 he entered the University of Florida to work on his doctorate. At Florida he has served in the English department as a graduate assistant, and he has been the recipient of two National Defense Fellowships. He married Phyllis Marie Dell Cort in 1959, and is the father of two children, Sean and Margaret.

This dissertation was prepared under the direction of the chairman of the candidate's supervisory committee and has been approved by all members of that committee. It was submitted to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate Council, and was approved as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

June, 1969

E. Ruffin Jones  
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

Dean, Graduate School

Supervisory Committee:

Anthony Williams  
Chairman

Harold A. W. Kim

John Bowers